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THE BLACK RIDER; Or, THE HORSE-THIEVES' LEAGUE.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "CROOKED CALE," "THE BOY PARDS," "DEADLY DASH," "PANTHER PAUL," ETC., ETC.



"COME ON!" TOUCHING HIS FIERY CHARGER WITH THE SPUR, AND FOLLOWED BY HIS BAND, THE BLACK RIDER LEAPED THE BARS AND DASHED OFF THROUGH THE DARKNESS.

The Black Rider;

OR,

The Horse-Thieves' League.

A Tale of Rough Life on the Border.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "CROOKED CALE," "THE BOY
PARDS," "DEADLY DASH," "PANTHER
PAUL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. NOCTURNAL EVENTS.

"JOE MOREY!"
"Here, cap'n!"
"You arranged this job, I believe; how does the ground lay?"

"I hed thet honor, and if you'll lis'en, I can show you plainer'n the nose on old 'Leather-head's' face yander, and more'n that couldn't be said," returned the man called Joe Morey, pressing his horse forward through the crowd to the side of the first speaker.

It was a strange, suspicious-looking gathering, grouped there in the little glade beneath the full rays of the moon. Perhaps a dozen in all, they were mounted generally upon fine beasts, and as they moved to and fro, the light glanced from many a weapon at their waists.

Neither of these facts was anything unusual or to be wondered at, for at that time, and in a new country, all went armed, and never thought of walking. But it was the time—close upon midnight; the place—far from the main road, and the articles each man carried, either attached to the saddle or upon his arm.

Not one but carried an extra bridle, or perchance a halter, and suspended around their necks were thick black masks, or rather hoods, that, when donned, would effectually conceal both face and hair.

"Never mind your comments," returned the clear, mellow tones of the captain, now tinged with impatience, "but come to the point at once. We have no time to spare."

"Jest so. I'll be as short as pie-crust. Well, then, we're here 'bout midway between three houses that I've spotted, where we can make a raise. Mart Miller's, where there's three fine horses and a number one mule; Rauschelbach's where thar's three more, and Lansdown's, where they've five prime critters."

"At Miller's the old man is sick abed, so thar's only the women to look out for. Dutchy and his two boys sleep so sound that you might take the bed from under them and they not be a mite the wiser; those are easy, but we must be more careful at Lansdown's. The ol' man and Ed both are lightning on the shoot and wouldn't make much bones of pluggin' a feller. But then they depend a good deal upon thar big dog, who sleeps in the stable."

"Then that job is out of the question," impatiently muttered the other.

"Beg pardon, cap'n, but I reckon not. I rather think the pup is fast asleep long afore this; that is, if 'bout a peck o' strychnine'll do the business. I tended to that before dark," chuckled Joe Morey.

"Good! then we will pay them a visit. Morey, you Woody, and Teel will go with me. The rest of you can divide and visit Miller's and the Dutchman's. Make a clean sweep and then hurry to the first station, leave the horses, and get back home before dawn. Do you understand?"

A general assent was given.

"But remember, no bloodshed, if you can possibly get along without it, and take good care not to be recognized. If there is any danger wear your masks. Now go, and be cautious. Come, Morey, lead the way as quick as you can and keep that long tongue of yours between your teeth."

Morey left the glade, entering a faintly-defined trail, closely followed in single file by his comrades, and soon after reached a fence of the description known as "snake," or "Virginia rail," inclosing a field of young corn, along which they rode, advancing slowly and cautiously for some minutes. Then the guide drew rein and spoke, in a whisper:

"See, yon is the house, and here, this side, is the stable. Now, unless they've found out about the dog, we're all hunky. If they hev, why they'll 'spicion somethin's up, and 'll be on the watch, and if so, the sooner we git out o' here the safer I'll feel. You mind my hoss an' I'll go see whether they be or no."

"All right, but be cautious," whispered the leader, as Morey scaled the fence.

The house was a large, double, one-story log building, situated in a large yard, and sheltered by several venerable elms. Back of this were the kitchen, smoke-house and other outbuildings common to the Western farms; while in another inclosure stood the stables, corn-cribs, pig-pens, etc. Toward these latter Jim Morey had vanished.

Some little time elapsed before he reappeared, and as the soft moonlight fell upon his features, it was evident he was vexed at something.

"Well, what luck, man?" asked the leader. "Have they found it out?"

"No, I guess not; it all seems quiet. But the best critter of the lot is gone. Ed's black mare is missing, although she was here at sundown. So there's a good hundred lost," the spy ejaculated, in a disgusted tone.

"But the others—you said there were five, didn't you?—are they worth the risk?" asked the captain.

"There ain't four better critters on any one farm in the territory; but this one, Ed's Queen, you know, was the best. You must 'a' seen her?"

"Perhaps I have; but we've no time to lose talking. You lead the way, Morey, and Teel will mind the horses here. Let down a panel of the fence; it will be less risky than to go by the gate."

These orders were quickly obeyed without demur, and it was quite evident that the three men held their companion in wholesome dread. The panel was let down, and the two followed close in the lead of Morey across the lot, and in a few moments stood beside the stable-door.

"Look!" whispered the guide, pausing beside an object, and kicking it with his foot, "here's the dog. Poor devil, it was a pity to kill him, for a better or more faithful brute never wore hair. And fight! good gracious, how that pup would fight! Why, cap'n—"

"There, that'll do, my good fellow," impatiently interrupted the other, "we'll hear his history at some other more convenient time. That unruly tongue of yours will be the death of you yet."

"The gift o' gab ain't entirely confined to me, anyhow," muttered Joe. "But see, here we go!" and as he spoke he noiselessly swung the stable-door open. "Take a good look now, for I must shet 'em up ag'in for fear somebody might notice it. Thar's the horses, and the bridles is a-hanging to the stalls."

"All right. Now shut the door, and secure your animals, quick!"

With the short glance afforded by the moon's rays streaming in at the door, the position of each horse had been noted; but there was one important circumstance that eluded them, as they were destined to realize very speedily. And this was the stalwart form of a man reclining upon a pile of hay, with a gun resting idly against his shoulder, fast asleep.

The leader of the horse-thieves quickly bridled and saddled his horse, and then leading it to the door, awaited for Morey, who had two to secure. Alex. Woody led forth his beast, and still the man slept.

"Come, come, man—hurry!" impatiently muttered the leader.

"I'm a-com— Curse the devil, he's mashed my foot!" roared Joe, losing all command of himself and raining a storm of blows upon the horse that had trodden upon his foot.

"Halloo there! what are you up to?" interrupted a full, sonorous voice, and as if it possessed some potent spell, everything was stilled; then came four rapid, distinct clicks, as a double-barreled gun was full-cocked. "Who is there? Speak, or by the Eternal, I'll give you such a dose of buckshot that a sieve 'll be nowhere to your hide!"

"Be off, men!" cried the clear, ringing voice of the leader, as he urged his horse out of the open doorway. "Save the horses if possible, but yourselves at any cost!"

"Ha—a—h!"

It was an exclamation from the watcher—almost a roar, it sounded so deep and deadly, as he sprung to his feet, and with a couple of bounds gained the stable-door. The forms of the two fleeing horse-thieves were still near, and quite plainly revealed by the clear moonlight as they sped across the open lot to the spot where the fence had been let down.

With another muffled cry of rage, the farmer hastily leveled his shot gun and drew the trigger. But in the mean time, where was Joe Morey, the unintentional cause of this commotion, and what was he doing?

When he heard the first exclamation of the

awakened farmer, his heart gave one great throb and then stood still. He thought no more of his injured foot, the horse, or indeed any thing but as to how he was to effect an escape from his perilous situation.

Not that Morey was a coward; far from it. In general he was daring and reckless to a fault and appeared to love danger for danger's sake. But if ever there were two men he held in perfect awe, they were stalwart John Lansdown and his son, Edward; and when they were near Joe's usually voluble and sarcastic tongue was mute and voiceless.

But he knew that, did he remain where he now was, in the horse's stall, he could not escape discovery, and discovery in such a case meant death, either by the hands of the injured farmer or his neighbors, when they should learn of this new outrage. The only avenue of escape was by the door, but to gain this he must run the gantlet of the well-known "double-barrel."

However, when he saw his comrades flee and Lansdown leap to the entrance and raise his weapon, his audacity returned, and he resolved to save their lives. Swiftly leaping forward, he ducked his head adroitly between the widespread legs of the farmer, and then with a strenuous effort lifted him clear from his feet and hurled him head-foremost to the ground.

It was accomplished not one second too soon, for the triggers were pulled at the same moment, but the leaden missiles whistled harmlessly over the heads of the fugitives to spend their force upon the neighboring tree-tops.

Joe did not pause to receive the congratulations of Lansdown upon his adroit trick, but with a wild peal of merriment sped like a grayhound over the intervening space, and when the confused and irate farmer arose he could only hear the quick, rapid beat of hoofs as the marauders fled with their booty.

The settler soon regained his gun and brought forth the horse that Morey had already saddled and bridled, turning the other one loose in the field. Lights were now seen in the house and the door opened, revealing two partially-dressed women gazing out toward the stable.

"Father, what's the matter? are you hurt?" one voice called to the settler, anxiously.

"No; but, curse the luck, two of the horses are gone!" he growled, as he sprung into the saddle and urged the snorting horse over the intervening picket-fence and up to the door. "Mother, you and Alice stay inside and keep the door barred until I come back."

"Why, father," answered the elder woman, in anxious alarm, "where are you goin'?"

"After those cursed horse-thieves, of course! Hand me out the powder and bullets—quick!"

"Not alone? Father, you mustn't go—they'll kill you, I know they will! Wait until day, and then get some of the neighbors to help."

"Yes, and then it'll be as it always has before—the horses gone, the deuce only knows where. Alice, girl, don't be forever!" cried the settler, impatiently.

"Here they are, uncle," responded the girl, handing both powder-horn and bullet-pouch to the man, who hastily began charging the gun.

"Alice, beg him—father, you shall not go! wait until Edward comes back," implored the wife, clasping her husband's knees.

"Look here, mother," returned Lansdown, in a hoarse voice, that told how strong were his feelings; "don't provoke me—I'm mad enough now, and I shouldn't like to speak harshly to you, as I must, if you keep on. I tell you I must and will go. There's no danger whatever to me. They're too big cowards to show fight; but if I ever lay my eyes on any of them, may the Lord have mercy on them, for I won't! Now go in and go to bed, and don't fret, for I'll come back all right and sound. Let loose, now, I can't stop," and with gentle force the settler unclasped his wife's hands; then, with a hoarse cry, drove his heels deep into the horse's flanks, clearing the fence with a bound, and then vanished amid the shadows.

"My God! he's gone, and I'll never see him again until they bring him home all bloody and dead, like they did poor Tom Harley!" groaned the wife, as she staggered back against the house.

"No, no, don't talk so, aunt Molly," said the other woman, half-leading, half-dragging her into the house. "You know how brave and how strong uncle is; there's nobody that'll dare to hurt him. There, now, sit down while I close the house—you know he told us to keep the door barred," and the light, small figure swung the heavy door to and secured it with a brace of strong bars.

"Oh, John! John!" murmured his wife.

crouching down in the chair and wringing her hands in great distress.

"Now, aunt," added Alice, returning to the side of the elder woman, "you know what uncle John said—this is weak and foolish. He said there was no danger, and that he'd be back soon."

"Yes; he is so brave and strong that he don't feel it; but it nearly kills me. I can't forget how poor Harley looked, and I know it will be just like that now!"

"Aunt, cheer up; look at me, I'm not afraid."

"Yes, I know; but he is not *your* husband; why should you care? I do believe you'd be just the same if they should bring him home—"

"Why, aunt—!" murmured Alice, her voice faltering and the large blue eyes filling with tears.

"There—there, pet, don't cry; you know I didn't mean it. But I don't know what I am saying; my head aches so that I believe I'll go crazy!" moaned the half-distracted wife.

"Don't, aunt, please don't talk so or I'll break down too. See, I'm going to start up the fire, and then we'll have a good strong cup of tea, and wait up until he comes home. Won't he have a good, hearty laugh at your fears, when I tell him in the morning. And so will you, too, then, when you see how foolish they were."

Alice continued talking in this strain, as she uncovered the fire and piled on fresh wood until the crackling, roaring blaze paled that of the tallow dip. But it was plain that she was far from being collected and at ease in her mind as she wished to show, for her voice faltered at times and her speech was incoherent.

However, it had the desired effect, and the elder woman grew more calm and assured, though the color did not return to her cheek and the affrighted look still shone in her eyes. In truth, they had good cause for alarm, when they knew that the hot-blooded settler was alone in his pursuit of a party of desperate, crime-hardened outlaws, who would not scruple at bloodshed if it became necessary for their safety.

A few words may not be amiss concerning the state of the country at the time of which we speak, and, in fact, is necessary to the proper understanding of the story we are about to tell. That we are not more explicit regarding locality, is due to the fact that many are yet living who can remember many of the more prominent incidents, and identify several of the characters, under the thin veil of a change of names.

We speak of Kansas—then a territory—in the days when the title she has since borne, of "Bleeding Kansas," was nearly as appropriate and well earned as the "Dark and Bloody Ground" of Kentucky.

Then on the borders of civilization, it was a refuge and rendezvous for the blood-stained and crime-hardened, the refuse and off-scouring of those States where the law was not entirely a dead letter or an empty title and byword, as here. It was one continuous struggle between them and the more honest settlers, where cunning met cunning, and bloodshed was of daily occurrence.

The entire country was flooded with counterfeit money, while horse-thefts were of nightly occurrence. But, until of late, the portion of the territory we have to deal with had not been disturbed to any very great extent; now, however, amends were being made!

There appeared to be a regularly organized band of the outlaws who had chosen this section as their "stamping-ground," and whose work was carried on with systematic precision, as the settlers found, to their cost. Who they were appeared to know, but there was a kind of vague rumor of a mysterious man to whom command of the outlaws was attributed.

Who, or what this personage was, where he resided, his appearance or name, were shrouded in deep mystery. Only one thing was positively affirmed; and from that came the title by which he was known—The Black Rider.

Upon his face he was said to wear a closely-fitting mask of some dark color, and there were those who testified to having met him in broad daylight, riding a noble black horse dressed all in the same somber color, and with his features covered with the mask, through the eye-holes of which shone with a peculiar luster a pair of large, jetty eyes. Others again ridiculed these statements, as the idle fabrications of idler minds; and thus the matter stood.

Several *rencontres* had occurred between this band and those whom they were despoiling, and upon two occasions had resulted fatally; one of the unfortunates being Thomas Harley, a near neighbor of the Lansdowns, and the person al-

luded to by the wife of the farmer, as we have heard.

More than once the settlers had congregated, and endeavored to form a league to oppose the outlaws, but so far the project had fallen through, owing to conflicting opinions among themselves. One of the main causes, however, was this; no one knew in whom to trust, or if his nearest friend was not one of the secret band; and one traitor in their confidence would frustrate any attempt they might make, and render all their plans futile.

Each man who had valuable stock—doubly so to them as their main dependence in getting in and harvesting their crops—appointed himself a detective, and would often spend his nights in the stable with gun or pistol ready for use, but scarcely ever with any result. It seemed as though the very birds of the air carried the news to the ears of the mysterious band, for let the unlucky farmer but neglect to watch one night, the chances were, that when day dawned, he would find his stable emptied of every thing in the shape of horse-flesh.

CHAPTER II.

THE RIDERLESS STEED.

In a short time Alice had prepared a strong cup of tea, and the two women sat before the fire in dreary silence, waiting in painful suspense for the return of John Lansdown. They spoke but little, for their thoughts were of a nature that made utterance a pain, rather than a relief.

The glow of the fire plainly revealed their forms and features, one at least of which was more than pleasing; almost beautiful. Alice Walker, the younger of the two, was not strictly a beauty, but there was something in her face, and shining out through her large blue eyes, that drew one toward her, almost insensibly, feeling that she had a nature not only loving and affectionate, but one as well upon which one could depend at all times to strengthen his own failing resolutions, were they for the right, or rebuke, if wrong.

Very quiet and unobtrusive, she was the one to whom the family, each and all, turned naturally when in sorrow or trouble, and so deftly did she administer hope and consolation, that often they knew not whence it came. In reality no relation, she had come to be regarded as one of the family, loved and treated as such.

When they removed to Kansas, from Ohio, broken in fortune, yet undaunted in spirit and resolution, she had accompanied them, and bravely bore her share of the hardships and difficulties incidental upon settling in a new country. It was her influence and spirit that strengthened the weak and despondent heart of Mary Lansdown, and interested her in the new home, for she, better than the others, understood the heart and nature of the bereaved mother.

As we have said, Alice would be called by a few, a beauty, by many, a very plain girl, but to those very well acquainted with her, she was as pure and lovely in face and form as in heart. Of slight, but neat and agile form; light, sunny brown hair, fair complexion that the hot sun did not appear to affect, her greatest outward charm lay in her soft, lustrous eyes.

But beneath that delicate, almost child-like exterior, there was hidden a spirit and will, that might, if occasion showed, work wonders of courage and resolution. None fully realized this, not even herself, for as yet they lay dormant, but the time was to come, not far in the future, when they must be called into play, for the welfare of those most dear to her upon earth.

The hours rolled on and still the two women sat there, only moving to stir up the fire or replenish it with wood, until at length the longed-for day dawned. Then Alice arose, with an effort, and drew the curtains aside.

"Aunt Mary, you had better go lie down now, while I get breakfast. Uncle will be hungry as a wolf when he returns."

"No, no, I must stay up until he comes, whether alive or—"

"Now don't talk so, aunt, or you will excite yourself so that you'll be down with that dreadful fever again. Hark! there he comes now, I hear his horse. Now you see how idle were your fears," added Alice, joyfully, as she glided to the window.

But the glad, eager look quickly faded from her face, and a wild, frightened stare came to her eyes, as she tottered back, pale and ghastly.

"My God! Poor Edward—what has happened?"

"Alice, Alice, what is it? what's the matter?"

shrieked the mother, as she rushed to the window, in alarm.

What she saw there did not tend to quell her fears. A noble-looking black horse was running around the stable-yard, pawing to leap the fence. Its jetty coat was stained and clotted with flakes of foam and splashes of mud, while the steam curled from its heaving flanks in a misty cloud.

"Oh, my heart! and Edward, too!" wailed the mother, as she strove to unbar the door with trembling hands that refused to obey her will. "Quick, quick, Alice, unfasten the door! He is dead—killed! I feel it in my heart!" sobbed the mother, as she staggered back into a chair.

"Wait here, aunt, until I go and see," faltered Alice, with pale and trembling lips, as she threw open the door.

"No, no, I must—give me your arm, girl; would you keep a mother from her son, when he is hurt?"

"Come, then, quick—oh, quick!" gasped Alice, as she supported the feeble steps of her aunt down to the gate, and from thence into the stable-yard.

The snorting animal quickly came up in obedience to the call of the girl, and thrust her soft muzzle against the hand that had so often fed it with dainty morsels. But it received no answering caress, for the mother uttered a wild, piercing shriek of agony, and gasped:

"See! I knew he was dead—murdered! See! the blood—the blood!"

Alice, too, saw the tell-tale stains, and her heart sickened within her breast, as she thought of the young man they had all loved so dearly, lying cold and ghastly beneath the first rays of day, in some lone and desolate spot, perhaps dead, perhaps dying, with no loving hand to soothe his pain, or ear to hearken to his last wishes. But the form of the stricken mother sinking at her feet, recalled the girl to her senses, and realizing that now was no time for idle grief and lamentation, she steeled her heart for work.

With strength lent by despair Alice managed to half-carry, half-drag the senseless body of the mother to the house, and deposit it upon the bed. Then she set about restoring her to consciousness, moving as if in a maze, and yet with precision and correctness.

The still prancing mare had followed them through the gate, and now approached the door, thrusting her dainty head through the aperture and uttering a low whicker that attracted Alice's attention. As if unconsciously she approached the horse and paused beside it, gazing, as if spell-bound, upon the saddle.

Upon the left side could still be seen great splashes of a dull red hue, although they were blurred and half obliterated, as though something had been drawn hastily over them.

Ah, right well did the maiden understand the meaning of this!

She knew that the handsome young settler had been either killed or wounded; that it was the life-current from his veins that had caused those ghastly stains, and that as his body or corpse had fallen from the saddle, it had blurred and blotted the gouts.

With a moan she turned again toward the still insensible woman, and paused abruptly and bent her head in eager attention. Afar down the road she could distinguish the fast-approaching clatter of a horse's hoofs, and then the rider dashed up to the gate, and dismounting, speedily fastened his panting horse and entered the yard. Alice recognized him for one of their neighbors, and rushed to meet him.

"Oh, Mr. Curry, Edward is killed—!"

"No, Miss Alice, no he ain't, not by a long shot," cheerily replied the old man, as he warmly clasped her extended hands in his own brown, toll-hardened palms. "He's worth a dozen dead men yet."

"What—do—you—" began the girl, but her voice choked and faltered, and she could only conclude the question by an eager, almost wild, gaze.

"Come, let's go in and talk it over quietly, my little girl. He's alive, I tell you, and will be along here presently, to tell you so himself, if you don't believe me. So now cheer up, wipe them pritty eyes o' yours, and git some breakfast, for he'll be hungry as a wolf; and I won't be no way back'ards nyther, now I tell you," drawing her toward the house.

"Mr. Curry, you would not deceive us, he is well and alive?" pleaded Alice, as though the news was too good to be credited, after the evidence to the contrary.

"My gracious, what a girl you are, to be sure! I say yes! he is alive, and able to walk alone;

although I don't know—or rather I do know, that his nice new clothes is spiled," laughed the sturdy settler.

As they neared the door, a pale, wan figure rose from the bed and tottered forward.

"My son—where is my son Edward? Have you brought me home his body?"

"Why bless you, Mrs. Lansdown, what for should I do that? The lad is big enough and strong a plenty, to bring it home for himself. He is alive, and will be here in a few minutes, so you can— Look out, Alice, she's going to faint!" and the farmer sprung forward and supported the woman to a chair.

But the swoon was of short duration, and then when Mrs. Lansdown revived, she was gradually convinced that her son was indeed alive, though wounded.

"You see," said farmer Curry, "I was up all last night watchin' my horses, for I didn't know when those dratted thieves would pay me a visit, and was in a half-doze when I heard a horse's fut in the road. I roused up an' listened, peeking out through the winder of the harness-room, and I could see—for the moon, you know, was very bright—two men a-horseback, a-ridin' in diff'rent d'rections.

"They met jist in front o' the house, and then both stopped. One o' them hollered out somethin', I couldn't make out jist what, but I knowed by the voice it was Ed. Then the other one he up and blazed away twic't with a pistol, an' Ed he dropped like a log.

"I run out, quick es I could, but the rascal hed cut stick, and I jist had a glimp' o' him as he turned the neck. Well, I picked the lad up, and thought at first he was dead, but then he said somethin' in a low tone that I didn't catch, and fainted.

"My old woman was up by this time, and with her help I got Ed in the house and on the bed, when we found out thet he hed only been hit onc't, in the shoulder. It looked bad, it bled so much, but after all it was only a skin cut. I left Nancy a-doin' of it up, and went out to catch his mar', for fear she'd run home and give you all a scare, but the critter hed already gone.

"When I told Ed, he begged me to saddle up and come on ahead to settle your fears, and tell some of the neighbors to go help him home. I did so, and now you see, my little girl, that unless you hurry up with that breakfast, Ed 'll be here afore it's ready," concluded Curry, rising to his feet and filling his pipe.

"You'll stay until he comes, won't you?" asked Alice, as he stepped to the door.

"Sartinly. I'm too hungry with my ride to leave afore. But I'll go put the mar' up and feed her, while I take a smoke. But whar's the old man? Gone after Ed?" he asked, suddenly.

In a few words, Alice told him what had occurred during the night.

"Sho! well, now, that's too bad; the best critters in the neighborhood, too! Well, it's no use talkin', we've did too much o' that a'ready, and it's jist about time to act. Them cussed sneaks 'll keep on until they won't leave a hoss or a mule in the country!" growled the farmer, knitting his brows and puffing vindictively as he led the black mare to the stable.

Alice bustled around in her old lively manner now that her worst fears were relieved, and once even broke out into a snatch of a song, but a glance at the pale, careworn face of her aunt checked this; then she worked in silence. The table was quickly spread and the dishes placed, while the ham and eggs sputtered over the fire, the steam pouring from the spout of the great coffee-pot, and the "johnny-cake" began to brown and crisp.

Farmer Curry returned to the house and endeavored to draw the elder woman from her dejection by his lively conversation, but receiving only monosyllabic answers, if any at all, he soon ceased and turned to Alice.

"Where hed Ed been, Alice, and what was he ja'nting around the country in the night time for?"

"I don't know. A man brought him a note last night as we were at supper, and he left soon after, without telling me where he was going."

"It wasn't from the widder, was it? What's her name—the one who bought the Grable place?"

"Mrs. Sherwood—Isabella, I believe. No, what made you think that?" asked Alice, bending over the skillet and flushing hotly, not alone from the glow of the fire.

"Oh, I was only joking. But she's a mighty likely woman, anyhow, only a leetle too cold and snowy-like for my taste. Does Ed know her, d'y' think?"

"I believe not, but he may. Has your wife called on her yet?"

"Yes, onc't, I think, but they don't hitch well. Nancy says she is too grand a lady for her. For my part, I don't see what she wants, out here in the woods. It don't seem the place for sech as her, who w'ars her silks, satins and di'ments, like she does. And then, don't you think, Nancy says she had raal chaney and silver onto the table, though thar wasn't anybody but her to eat, afore my old 'oman drapped in. Wife was so oneasy that she couldn't eat a mite, though— But hello, thar comes the men now, with Ed!"

Sure enough, as they glanced out the doorway they could see a wagon slowly approaching, and sitting upon the front seat was Edward Lansdown, whom they had so lately mourned as dead, looking, as farmer Curry said, worth a score of dead men yet, although somewhat pale and weak from excessive loss of blood, owing to one of the minor arteries having been severed by the treacherous shot.

Alice and Curry hastened out to meet them at the stile, but they were both outstripped by the half-frantic mother, who reached the wagon as it paused and then was clasped to the breast of the young settler, who sprung from the wagon without waiting for assistance.

"Oh, Eddie—Eddie, we thought they had killed you!" sobbed his mother hysterically.

"But you see they haven't, don't you, mother?" he returned cheerily. "I'll live to make you lots more trouble, never fear. Alice, pet, you don't look very frightened," he added, as she drew near.

"Mebbe she don't, now, but if you'd 'a' seen her when I did, my boy, you'd think dif'rent. You're a lucky chap, Ed, if you don't know it," chimed in Curry, with a significant nod and wink.

"Yes, this looks like it; but say, I move we all adjurn to the house; I for one, am awful hungry, and I feel—a little—that is—"

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed the farmer, as he sprung forward and caught the reeling form of the young man, "he's fainty, an' here we be a-talkin' like fools, not thinkin' but what he was a sound man, instead o' one who's lost a bushel or more o' blood. Lay hold, Dick Mawson, and let's git him to the house."

"Never mind, Curry," whispered Edward, with a faint smile. "I'd rather walk, if you'll give me your arm. I don't want to frighten mother."

As she beheld her son's weakness, the alarm and timidity of Mrs. Lansdown vanished like magic, and she became as firm and collected as she had before been hysterical.

"Here, Eddie, lean on me. Alice, run and fix a quilt in the great chair, before the fire—hurry."

"Let Dick, mother; you're hardly strong enough to support my great heavy carcass," remonstrated the wounded man, with a tender smile that told how deep and fervent was the love between mother and son.

"No, they have done enough for you, it is my turn now, and I am strong—you could not guess how strong I am when you need it, Eddie. Now, lean heavier, and we'll be there in a minute."

"I'll have to blush for myself every time I see any of you folks, after showing myself out such a baby," laughed Edward, faintly, as they entered the house and he sunk into the depths of the great rustic chair, now softly cushioned with comfortables taken from the bed.

"Look here, little girl," exclaimed farmer Curry in mock anger, as Alice knelt down at Edward's feet and attempted to remove his wet and soiled boots, "git up from thar, right away, and don't you dare ever let me see you cut up sech another caper as that. You never was 'tended for a bootjack."

"You won't let me do anything for him," half pouted Alice, but with a rosy flush as she resigned her position.

"Yes, I will, too, but not sech as this. Go fix him a good strong cup o' 'slops,' or else coffee; and then call us to breakfast, if them doin's on the fire hain't spilt. These good folks is awful hungry, I know, and so am I, too."

"I thought so! one word for them and two for yourself," laughed the girl. "Were you ever anything but hungry?"

"Look out, little one, or I'll tell somebody how jealous you were when I hinted that a certain note might be from the han'some widder. Quit your gawpin', Ed; we're talkin' secrets now," chuckled the grizzled old farmer.

In such strain Curry kept up the conversation, but a close observer would have noted that his gayety was too forced to be natural, and

that his mind was far from being at ease. Every moment he would cast a keen, searching glance through the open doorway, or else pause in his speech and appear to be listening intently.

In fact he was more concerned than he would care to confess about the prolonged absence of John Lansdown, since he had learned the object of his midnight ride. He knew well the fiery, hot-blooded temper of the settler, and that those in search of whom he was, were equally as determined, and dreaded the result should they come together.

If Lansdown should overtake any or all of the horse thieves, he knew there would be bloodshed, for the sturdy settler would not pause to calculate the odds now that his blood was up. And in Edward, who was as yet ignorant of what had occurred during his absence, the farmer had before him an evidence of the desperate resolution of the marauders.

Suddenly a gleam swept athwart his rugged and not unhandsome countenance, and he began talking and laughing loudly to attract the attention of the little party, while his eye furtively scanned the stretch of wood visible from where he had chosen his seat. His ear had caught the quick trampling of horses' hoofs, but did not wish the others to note it, lest, should it prove not to be the settler, their fears might be newly aroused by his continued absence.

"Hurray!" he shouted in delight as a party of horsemen spurred into sight, and foremost among them he recognized the farmer. "There comes old John, now, all safe and sound! Didn't I tell you so?" and then followed by all but Alice and the wounded man, he rushed down to the barn.

"Hellow, fellers, what's up? Goin' to camp-meetin' that you've all turned out in this style?"

"Camp-meetin' be durned!" growled one of the horsemen, wearily dismounting and leaning against the fence, as if exhausted. "It'd be a fun'ral ef I could hev my way."

"Why, Mark, old fellow, I thought you was down on your back. You don't look fit to be out, now."

"No more I ain't, nuther, but what's a feller to do? Last night a passel o' cussed sneaks cleaned out my stable right afore my eyes, as 'twere, jist as cool as a cucumber. But I heerd 'em as I lay shakin' like a dog swallerin' bones, an' le'ped to the door with my gun, an' ef it hedn't 'a' bin fer the dratted ager, I'd 'a' spotted one, anyhow. As 'twere I missed him an' put a bullet plum' center in my rule Jack's—the best one in the whole country—head, thet throwed him like a log. It made me so mad thet I jist tuck a'ter 'em—five, thar was, too—'bout stoppin' to dress, an' chased 'em a mile in my shirt-tail 'fore I found it out!"

"Yaw, py tam! dey vos peen dook all mein dree bonies, doo!" grunted a tall, bony Dutchman.

"Then you didn't catch them, Lansdown?"

"No," shortly replied the settler, leading the way over the stile-blocks; "come in, men, and let's have a snack as we talk it over and settle what we have to do."

"John, hold on a minute," added Curry, placing a hand upon the farmer's shoulder. "We've news for you, too, but it ain't so bad as it might have been. Don't git scart now, for he's all right; only a little scratch, like."

"What do you mean, Abe Curry?" demanded Lansdown, sternly, but with a gray shade upon his bronzed features. "Can't you speak out, like a man?"

"Well, then, Ed met one o' them devils and got hurt a little, but not much. Only a bullet through his shoulder. I thought best to tell you for fear the sight of him, all bloody, might give you a shock."

The settler did not answer, but strode swiftly into the house and stood beside his son, who extended his well hand with a faint smile.

"It's only a scratch, father."

"Who did it, Ed?"

"It was he whom men call the 'Black Rider,' or the devil, for aught I know," was the low, whispered reply.

"Tell me how it occurred."

"Won't you have some breakfast first?" timidly interposed Alice, drawing near the two.

"No—go on, Ned."

"Well, you know what I went for, last night," with a quick glance at Alice, and around the room. "I had got through the business and thought best to return home at once, for I expected mischief when we found poor Bounce poisoned, and had jist got to Curry's farm, when I met a horseman in the open, where the moon shone down in the road, almost as bright as day."

"I saw at a glance that the horse was 'Wild Irishman,' and halted the rider, thinking he was one of the neighbors who had borrowed him to go upon some errand. But I quickly saw my mistake, and drew my revolver, but before I could use it the scoundrel sent a bullet through my shoulder, and, Queen giving a jump, I fell off; and that, I believe, saved my life, for his second shot went through my hat as I fell."

"I had a fair look at him, and saw that he was dressed all in black, and wore a sort of black mask. I knew it could not be a negro, for I saw his small white hand and a ring flashed upon it. Then I must have fainted, for the next I remember I was in Curry's house. He brought word here that I was safe, and sent some of the neighbors to help me home."

"Well, if I hesitated before, this decides me," hoarsely exclaimed the farmer. "We must put a stop to these fellows' pranks, and there is only one way to do it!"

"And that is—"

"—To organize a *Vigilance Committee*, and hunt the devils out, at any cost! What do you say, neighbors; shall this gang ride over us rough-shod forever, without our lifting a finger to help ourselves?"

A general cry was given and all spoke in favor of the league. All, we said, but there was one among the party whose face turned a shade grayer, and a nervous gleam lit his eye, even as he cast his vote in its favor.

There was one traitor, at least, among them.

CHAPTER III.

A QUEEN OF HEARTS.

It was late in the afternoon of the day succeeding the eventful night upon which our story opens, that we ask our reader to accompany us into the interior of a good-sized frame dwelling, some two miles distant from the house of the Lansdowns.

A good deal of taste—at least for that time and region—had been exhibited in erecting the two-story house referred to, both in its architecture and location. Situated upon a little knoll, sloping in every direction, thus affording a good view of the surrounding country, it was shaded by a grove of venerable elm and oak trees. Seen through these, with its pale cream-color and dark-green blinds, it was a cosy and picturesque sight, rendered more so by the neatly-kept flower beds and evergreens.

Seated in a comfortably, even richly-furnished room upon the first floor, was the form of a lady, the mistress of the house. Although the windows were raised, the shutters were closed, with the filmy lace curtains drawn, and a subdued twilight filled the room.

This lady—Mrs. Isabella Sherwood, the widow whom honest Abe Curry had called "mighty likely, only too cold and snowy-like"—was reclining in the depths of an easy-chair, with a weary and careworn look upon her beautifully regular features, that seemed strangely out of place there.

In form tall and perfectly developed, of a superb symmetry and full, graceful contour, she realized one's ideal of a queen; one born to command and be obeyed without a murmur. Of a complexion dazzlingly pure and white for a brunette, with glossy black hair wound in massive coils at the back of her admirably-poised head, and eyes that, though now shaded by their long silken lashes, could flash with fire or melt with a languor almost voluptuous, she still seemed, as the worthy farmer had hinted, too cold and ice-like to feel the passionate love that she might well inspire in the breast of man.

Her rich, though somber dress served to lighten this effect, produced by the statuesque pose of her face. But then her appearance suddenly changed, as if by magic.

A bright flush suffused her cheek, and a gleam, strange and contradictory, came to her eyes as she half arose and turned toward the door. Twice her lips parted to speak before sound issued, and only when the rap at the closed door was repeated, did she utter, in a voice that faltered, despite her efforts at calmness.

"Come in."

The door gently swung open, and a dark-skinned woman entered, bearing a small tray covered with a snowy napkin.

"Oh, Nettie, is it you?" with a long-drawn breath of relief, as she sunk back again, while the hot flush died out from her cheek. "I thought it was— But what have you there?"

"Luncheon, please, missee. I t'ought you ring fo' 'um," obsequiously answered the maid, but as she passed behind the mistress to place the tray upon the table, a dark, deadly gleam

flashed from her large, lustrous eyes, and rendered the comely—almost beautiful, but for the color—features fiendish in the vindictive hatred there expressed.

"So I did, but I forgot. You may go now—Stay, Nettie," she hastily added as the quadroon was about leaving the room. "Is there any news, or anything doing around the neighborhood?"

"What way missee mean?" murmured the waiting-maid, with a furtive glance toward Mrs. Sherwood.

"Oh, anything! You know those dreadful horse-thieves—aren't it?—have been so outrageous of late, that I didn't know but they'd been at work again," wearily added the lady.

"Oh, yes, I did hear someth'ing. Dey steal 'um lot hosses las' night, an' shoot one man—berry good-lookin', too—"

"What do you say, Nettie? Shot a man? Who is it—do you know his name?" eagerly queried Isabella, turning around with a flushed cheek and bright eye.

"Yes, he name Mas'r Ed'ard Lansdown, young mas'r."

"Was he killed—or hurt badly?"

"I don't know, but he ain't dead, I guess. He wasn't dis mornin', anyhow. Jim he heerd it an' tole me."

"That will do, but send up James as you go. I wish to see him."

In a few moments an old negro man appeared and was motioned to a seat by his young mistress.

"James, Nettie tells me there was a man hurt last night; do you know anything about it?" she queried.

"Yes'm, I heerd so. 'Pears like he was a'ter one ob dem hoss-tieves, an' dey shot 'im plum' frough de soljer. Mighty bad he is, too, dey say."

"Do they know who did it? Strange that such things can be; why don't they hunt them out, I wonder?" added the lady, in a low tone, as if to herself.

"Dey say it was dat—de one dey call de Black Rider, who w'ars a nigger's hide on his face all de time, an' breaves fire an' brimstone an'—"

spluttered the darky, his eyes rolling wildly around the room, as if in quest of the fearful personage of whom such marvelous stories were told.

"There, there, James," smiled the lady, "that will do. I fear you are drawing rather largely upon your imagination for your facts. But do you know this—person? what is his name?"

"Mas'r Lansdown? 'deed I jest does, missee. He's de finest, han'somest, bestermest gem'—plum in de whull place!" affirmed the darky, warmly.

"Well, they must be poor, and need something I can furnish; so, James, have my horse—the gray—ready for use in ten minutes, and one for yourself. I'm going to call on them and see if there is anything I can do. Go, now, and make haste."

In less than the designated time Isabella emerged from the house, mounted the gray—a noble-looking animal—and followed by the groom, cantered briskly down the avenue leading from the grounds. If she looked beautiful in repose, she appeared perfectly radiant now, in her tasty, neatly-fitting riding-habit, with her cheeks slightly flushed and her eyes sparkling like twin gems.

Truly she was a lovely woman, for whose heart's love a man might well sell his soul, as the legend runs of olden times. And a perfect equestrienne, she controlled the fiery, mettled steed with a firm but light touch, her form almost seeming part of the animal, that still further enhanced her almost peerless grace and beauty.

"James, which way now?" as they came to a fork in the grass-grown road.

"To de left, Missee 'Bella," replied the negro, with the freedom of an old and trusted servant, calling her by the abbreviation of her given name. "To de left, an' den 'tra't ahead all de time."

"Ah, is it at the farm-house where we stopped for a drink of water the other day? where the pretty girl was, with golden hair?"

"Zactly; dat's de place."

"Who is she, James, do you know? his sister—the wounded man's, I mean?" added Isabella.

"Dunno, but guess not. She don't look nuffin' like none ob de fam'ly, 'cept herself. 'Spect she's some poor 'lotion," a little scornfully, as though he did not greatly admire one whose appearance was such a contrast to his loved "Missee 'Bella."

"Perhaps she's his wife, then," with a quick, sidelong glance at the servant.

"'Deed she isn't, den!" exclaimed Jim, earnestly. "Lord! he wouldn't look at sich as *her*, sich a fine buckra' as *he* is!"

"Why, you seem to be a strong admirer of him," laughed the lady, a little sharply. "How did he gain such an influence over you?"

"Don't know 'bout dat 'fluence, Missee 'Bella," a little doubtfully, "but I do know dis much, dat he's de on'y one dat I've see'd, sence we fust come to dis yer outlandish kentry, dat I'd like to hab fo' a mas'r."

"Come on, James," replied the lady, a little more sharply; "we must hurry, or we will be late in coming back," and she loosened the reins, allowing the impatient gray to break into a steady, swift gallop, that soon brought them in view of the farm-house.

Drawing reins at the stile-blocks, Isabella leaped lightly to the ground, without waiting for the clumsy movements of the groom, and cast him the reins.

"You wait here and hold him, James. I see there is the young lady now. I will not be long," and mounting the steps beside the bars, holding the long-flowing dress gracefully in either hand, the lady advanced to meet Alice, who was timidly approaching, having been called to the door by the sound of horses' feet.

"Good-evening; if I mistake not, we have met before," said Isabella, smiling frankly and extending her daintily-gloved hand, "and really I could not bear to remain a stranger any longer; so, as you would not come to me, I come to you. You know my name?—Mrs. Sherwood; or to *you* I should prefer to be Isabella."

"You are very kind," blushed the other, somewhat awed at the sight of such glorious beauty. "I am Alice Walker, and my aunt, Mrs. Lansdown, is within. Won't you come in? although I must apologize, I fear, for the looks of the house, for we are in great confusion to-day," she hesitated.

"Yes, I know you must be. I just heard of your brother's—"

"My cousin, you mean," blushed Alice, as Isabella half paused and looked at her.

"Excuse me; your cousin's mishap, and I thought I would call and ask if there was nothing I could do. Besides, I wished so much to make your acquaintance."

"You are very kind; but I believe there is nothing now, although they will feel very grateful to you for your thoughtfulness. But, please pardon me; here I am keeping you out in the broiling sun all this time!" exclaimed Alice, moving toward the house.

"But this—Mr. Lansdown, is he very much hurt? I have heard such terrible tales that I hardly know what to expect."

"No; it is comparatively trifling, I believe, and only dangerous from excessive loss of blood. He will be as well as ever in a week, the doctor says."

"Oh, I'm so glad it's no worse!" exclaimed the widow earnestly, and Alice glanced toward her with a deeper feeling of interest, since she appeared glad to hear of Edward's welfare.

Alice quietly introduced Mrs. Sherwood to the mother and son, and then glided about her household duties in her own gentle, unobtrusive way, stealing now and then a furtive glance at the bright, beautiful visitor, who had drawn Mrs. Lansdown from her despondent reverie, causing her to brighten up wonderfully, while the drowsiness was most effectually banished from the eyelids of the wounded man, by the same agency.

An unconscious sigh fluttered from Alice's lips as she noted the interested, almost eager gaze that Edward bent upon the sparkling beauty, following every change of her regal head or musical laugh, as if spell-bound. Then he turned his chair around until he fronted the widow, seeming to forget his wound, every thing save her who appeared to lighten up the room wonderfully, and whose clear, mellow voice sounded in his ears more pleasing than any thing he had ever heard before.

If Isabella Sherwood was lovely for a woman, Edward was no less handsome as a man. Of a tall, powerful, yet perfectly symmetrical form that reminded one of the representations of the athletes of old, there was yet a grace, and at times a tenderness of manner almost womanly, that rendered it doubly pleasing.

His face was bronzed by exposure, and partially covered with a heavy mustache and beard, of a silken, glossy blackness. His hair was profuse and slightly curling, brushed carelessly away from his broad white forehead. His large, keen eyes were now sparkling and

animated as they dwelt upon Isabella's face, drinking in long draughts of her glorious beauty.

Truly, there was some foundation for the thoughts that Alice had conceived; the two, Isabella and Edward, would, in good sooth, make a splendid couple. And as she thought this, the gentle girl softly breathed another sigh; then, as if alarmed, her face flushed, and she dropped her eyes upon her work.

More than once Edward intercepted a quick, searching glance from the lady's dark eyes, and experienced a strange, unaccountable sensation, that, however, he did not then attempt to analyze. Then she turned and addressed him, in a pleading tone that vastly became her:

"Surely, Mr. Lansdown, you will not refuse my offer, and persuade your father to accept it?"

"I—really, Mrs. Sherwood," he stammered, flushing, "I fear you will think me very impolite, but I did not exactly understand of what you were speaking. I was—"

"Do not apologize, I beg of you!" with a pretty little shrug and half-pout. "We poor women are used to being ignored by you 'lords of creation.' Our conversation is too frivolous for their ponderous intellects to comprehend."

"Mrs. Sherwood, you are far too severe, and to clear myself, I frankly admit that I was so enchanted with your voice, that the words escaped me," returned Edward, half laughingly, but with an undercurrent of earnestness that she could not misunderstand.

"Tit for tat! but your compliment—or sarcasm—makes amends," laughed Isabella, but with deepened blush. "However, jesting aside, I will repeat my offer. I have heard of your serious loss, the more so now that they are so badly needed upon the farm, and when they can not be easily replaced. But I have several more horses than I have any use for, at present, and it would greatly oblige me if you will accept the loan of a span until your crops are laid over."

"You are very kind, Mrs. Sherwood; but—" began the young man, his cheek flushing.

"Now please don't refuse, for really, the kindness will all be upon your side. They have nothing to do, absolutely, and would be the better for a little work. I have James ride them every day, but they don't get half enough exercise, and you know it would be like giving them away, to turn them loose in the pastures, the horse-thieves are so thick and audacious now."

"Well, for my part, I would be very glad; but father is very proud, and we are not able—"

"Now, Mr. Lansdown, you are too bad! What's the use of being neighbors if we are not to be accommodating? Besides, I may have a favor to ask in return, and I should never dare mention it if I am disappointed in this. I know how you would miss Miss Alice here; but I am going to coax her away with me for a day or two, if I can. I am so lonesome up there, all alone by myself, in that big, dull house."

"Take Alice away? why, we would be lost without her!" exclaimed Edward. "We would scarcely miss the house more. What do you say to that, mother?"

"I don't know. It might do the child good to have a little recreation; she's been tied so close to the house since I've been ill that she is growing pale and thin. Don't you think so, Eddie? But now I am stronger, she must go out more."

"There, Miss Alice, it rests with you," cried Isabella, turning to the girl. "Now surely you will not disappoint me."

"I don't know, Mrs. Sherwood. If I could be spared, I should be very happy. I used to visit the Grables often before you came, and I fairly love the old house," warmly replied Alice, her eyes sparkling.

"Then remember, 'tis a promise. And now I'll let you into a pet scheme of mine, if you won't tell. I'm going to give a party, and invite the whole neighborhood, for I do so wish to become acquainted with some of my neighbors. As an excuse, I am going to improvise a 'quilting bee,' for I know they will come sooner for that than if it was a mere party or dance; it won't look quite so much like play, you know," and the clear, musical laugh again filled the room with its melody.

"Look, mother," laughed the invalid, "if Alice's feet aren't actually dancing at the very thought of it!"

"And so would yours be, were you not afraid of hurting your sore arm," retorted Alice.

"Then you are both fond of dancing, Mr. Lansdown?" queried the widow.

"Passionately. Alice, yonder, would dance her feet off, if allowed, and I would sooner dance than eat, any time."

"Oh, I'm so glad! but your arm?"

"If you promise to postpone your party a week I will promise to claim the first set—may I?" eagerly responded Edward.

"With pleasure—provided you wish it, then. But I shall expect to see you there with your 'ladye fair,' and if so, poor I will stand but little show. But, bless me! the sun is down; I had no idea 'twas so late."

"If you would, Mrs. Sherwood, we should be greatly pleased to have you remain to supper," said Mrs. Lansdown.

"Oh, no, I really could not, much as I should like it. I have several letters to write and must be going. But you will urge my offer upon Mr. Lansdown, please? Tell him it will be a favor to me, at least as much so as to him."

"I will tell him."

"Then I'll send James over with a span in the morning early, and shall be dreadfully disappointed if you do not make use of them. We're neighbors, now, remember, and must make each other useful, if we can. But good-day. I shall expect to see you all over my way soon, when you are more settled again."

"Thank you; we will be glad to come. And you, who have nothing to detain you, please don't stand on ceremony, but come often, now the ice is fairly broken."

"You will regret it, I fear, if you give me *carte blanche*, for I may prove sadly troublesome," laughed Mrs. Sherwood, as she stepped out into the open air. "And you, Mr. Lansdown, please hurry and get well, for I am longing for that dance; it is so long since my last one."

"I shall dream of it to-night," protested Ed, half laughing.

With a few more words the visitor lightly tripped down to the stile-blocks, accompanied by Alice, while Mrs. Sherwood and Edward gazed after them. The admiration the young settler had been inspired with, was in nowise lessened when he noted her firm, graceful carriage upon the prancing horse, as she waved them a last adieu, and then galloped swiftly down the shadowed road.

Alice was unusually grave as she slowly returned to the house, and a subdued look of pain or care rested upon her face, while her heart beat with almost throbbing might; why, she did not attempt to reason.

CHAPTER IV. THE FIRST BLOWS.

It was nearly ten o'clock on a bright starlight night; the moon had not yet risen, and the road that led past the fence of a certain farm was cast in deep shadow by the overhanging trees. Along this road a single horseman was proceeding, as if in deep thought, with the bridle-reins hanging loosely in the small gloved hand.

But the black horse appeared to be well acquainted with his whereabouts, and as the corner of the rail fence was reached it turned off into a bridle-path leading up in front of a long low farm-house. The bushes brushing the rider's legs aroused him from his reverie and he glanced quickly around him with a start. Then with a short, soft laugh he urged his horse up beneath a huge spreading tree close to the house, giving a low, peculiar whistle.

The trunk was apparently hollow, for a voice sounded from the interior, uttering the words:

"All right, cap'n; most of 'em is in thar a'ready."

"Very well. You wait here until the others come, and if you see any suspicious signs, give the signal. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but why? do you think they 'spect anythin'?"

"I don't know, but they are very busy and might chance along. I expect Drace with news to-night."

"Then he has j'ined them?"

"The *Vigilantes*? yes. But now keep a good lookout," and then the speaker led his horse through the bars and secured him in the rear of the stables, where were a dozen others tethered.

There was no ray of light visible through the closed shutters of the house, but the man glided up to the door and rapped gently upon it. After a short delay and low whispering, the door was opened sufficiently to admit his person, then quickly closed and barred.

"Where's your light, mother Moss; it's so dark here that a person can feel it!" whispered the new-comer, impatiently.

"Jem didn't think it safe, cap'n. But gi' me your hand and I'll take you safe enough. This way—mind the step down, an' the top o' the

doorway. Thar—now wait a minnit tell I git the pesky door open."

The door at length yielded and a short flight of steps were revealed, leading down into a long low room, dimly lighted and filled with clouds of strong tobacco-smoke. Through this hazy, impure atmosphere could be distinguished the forms and features of nearly a dozen men of various ages and appearance.

As the man addressed as captain stepped into the room after closing the door behind him, he was greeted with a low murmur, and every man arose to his feet and doffed his head-covering in salutation. The person thus honored nodded slightly and then took the chair that seemed reserved for his own use, and keenly scrutinized each man, in turn.

He was neatly dressed in a suit of black cloth, that fully revealed his rounded, handsome form, evincing considerable activity, if not of personal strength. His hands and feet were small and well formed, while a brace of small silver-mounted revolvers peeped from his belt.

But one peculiarity added still further to his remarkable appearance, and that was—a closely-fitting sable-hued mask covered his entire face, only allowing a view of the keen, glittering eyes that roved restlessly around the room. It was the Masked Outlaw—the Black Rider—the mysterious head of the gang of horse-thieves, counterfeiters, and wanderers that had proved such a scourge of late to the country.

Then he spoke, in a low, musical voice, that sounded strangely from beneath the sable disguise.

"Have any of you seen Stephen Drace, to-day?"

"I have, captain," said a young man, arising, "and he said that he would be here without fail, by ten, to-night."

"It is already half past," returned the chief, consulting a watch, that flashed with a thousand scintillations on the dim, flickering light cast by the two rude tallow dips. "But we will allow him a little grace. In the mean time I will give you a few instructions. But first, Davenport, how about that last lot of horses?"

"They were sent to the Third Station, an' Jack Mosby takes them over into Missory to-night," replied a dirty, stout-built scoundrel, vigorously scratching his tangled head, as if in search of the desired words—a habit of his, at all times.

"Good! how many have you at the First?"

"Only the four as was brung in last night. Tim is fixin' 'em up now, with shears, paint an' sich-like, an' I'll defy the owner to tell 'em, this time to-morrow," chuckled Davenport, again plying his digits.

"Now for the rest. You all know how we were fooled at the Grable place by those patent locks? Well, this woman, Mrs. Sherwood, has lent old Lansdown a span of her best cattle in place of those we borrowed last week. So that makes five good ones he has in his stable, now."

"To-morrow night she gives a big party, and I have learned that the woman and Ed, if not the old man himself, will all be there, and of course will stay till late. We mustn't lose this chance, if only to show the widow that she can't expect to fool us always. I will have other business on hand, but I want three or four of you to go and borrow them. Do you understand?"

A general murmur followed.

"I would rather it was some one from your way, Davenport, for I suppose that most of us here in this neighborhood will be at the party. All that can had better go, so that suspicion will be averted. And to keep the matter up, Somers and Jack Story both had better lose theirs. You will be furnished money from the fund to buy others, and be paid for the loss of time. It would look strange if yours were left and the others taken," added the chief, as the two men looked disconcerted.

For some minutes after this speech, silence reigned in the little room. Then a bustle was heard in the house, followed by the quick tramping of feet and muffled tones as of some person greatly excited, yet not forgetting their usual caution.

"Quick—your masks, men!" sharply ordered the chief. "I fear there is trouble brewing!"

Instantly, as with one accord, each member of the league donned a thick black mask, or hood, that entirely covered their heads and faces, and arose to their feet as the door quickly opened and two men entered, followed by the old woman known as mother Moss. The foremost man was none other than he who had exhibited signs of agitation at Lansdown's when the farmer avowed his intention of hunting

down to the bitter end, the troublesome marauders, to whom he, Stephen Drace, in reality belonged.

"What means this, Drace?" sternly cried the chief, stepping forward. "And you, Moss, why have you left your post without orders?"

"The jig's up, cap'n!" exclaimed Drace, excitedly, "an' the sooner you all get out o' here, the better. The Vigilantes is comin' to 'rest Moss an' s'arch the place!"

"Do they know anything for certain, or is it only suspicion?" queried the Masked Outlaw.

"Only guess-work, but they're on the road an' I'll be here in less'n a quarter!" spluttered the alarmed spy.

"Half that time is enough," calmly replied the leader. "Davenport, you, Jack Story and Somers go out and halter Moss's two horses and get the others ready for a quick start. Hurry now." Then turning to Drace, he added: "Now tell me why you didn't let Dick Mawson know this when you told him you'd be here to-night?"

"I didn't know nothin' about it until to-night a'ter sundown; then they said they's comin' here. They've 'rested Joe Morey, Woody an' Markle, a'ready, an' is goin' to gi' them a taste o' Lynch law an' then make 'em leave the country."

A deep-drawn breath and convulsive clinching of the leader's hand were the only evidence that the chief was annoyed or alarmed at this news; then he said:

"They are good men and have close tongues. But now, Moss, for you and your mother. We must take your horses and bind you to prevent the Vigilantes from treating you like the others, as you hear. Quick! come up all of you, and see that the door is concealed well. Out with the lights!"

"Lordy, cap'n!" groaned the terrified settler, "let us go 'long with you! Them fellers 'll hang us, for sure."

"No they won't, you coward; don't you see? When they find you bound and robbed, they'll trust you more than ever. While if you leave, you lose every thing and wouldn't dare ever to return," hastily uttered the chief, as he assisted to bind the man, while others performed the same service for the old woman, who exhibited far more courage and good sense than did her son.

"There! now when you hear them come up, you can halloo and scream as much as you wish, the more the better, and don't spare your lies. But as you value your life, don't confess any thing or allow them to discover the room below."

"Tell them we've gone up the road. Now mind, if you betray one of us, the rest will hunt you to death without mercy!" and then the outlaw chief glided from the building and joined his men, who were already mounted and impatient for the road.

"They will come from the east, so we will go up the road to the fork and then scatter. Come on!" ordered the chief, touching his fiery charger with the spur, and followed by his band the Black Rider leaped the bars and dashed off through the darkness, vanishing among the somber shadows like a troop of phantoms, but for the ring of steel-shod hoofs.

Scarcely had the echoes died away, ere their counterpart sounded in the opposite direction, and then a considerable band of horsemen dashed in view around the corner of the fence, coming from the same direction as had the Masked Outlaw, and, a little later, the spy; but their game had flown.

They drew rein at the rude bars, and while some half a dozen were left to hold their horses, the remainder crossed the fence and were approaching the house, when muffled cries were heard from the interior.

The Vigilantes paused and listened. They could distinguish two voices; one deep and hoarse, the other shrill and cracked, and knew them for those of Jem Moss and his old mother.

"There's been mischief here, men," exclaimed the deep tones of John Lansdown, as he dashed forward with drawn revolver. "Come on, and let's see what's up!"

"Oh, please don't kill us, good mister robber—don't kill us, and we'll be still!" pleaded the old woman with admirably-feigned terror, as Lansdown entered the house.

"What do you mean, woman?—who's robbers?" cried the farmer, as he stumbled over a prostrate form, that kicked and squirmed as if in mortal alarm.

"Ah, don't, for the Lord's sake, don't!" she moaned. "Take the critters, take the money, everythin', but don't kill me an' my Jemmy!"

"Thunder and blazes!" shouted Lansdown, "strike a light, somebody, and let's see what all this rumpus means."

"Ow—ow—they're goin' to burn us, house an' all!" yelled Jem Moss, gaining courage as he saw that their ruse bade fair to be successful.

"Confound you for a pair of stupid fools!" roared the irate farmer, bestowing a couple of hearty kicks upon the yelling man. "Don't you understand? I'm John Lansdown, and these are all friends, your neighbors, the Vigilantes."

"Good! here's a dip, an' we'll soon have some light upon the subject," exclaimed farmer Curry, as he struck a match and finally succeeded in lighting the candle. "There, you idiots, don't you know me?"

"Praise the Lord, Jemmy," cried mother Moss, delightedly, "it's Mister Curry an'—"

"Then 'tain't them will'ins come back to murder us, as they said?"

"'Villains'—what under the sun do you mean? Who is it you're afraid of, and why are you trussed up here like a roasting pig?"

"Deed, 'tain't our fault, Mister Lansdown," piteously chimed in the old woman; "we didn't do it; it was—"

"Well, if ever I met two fools—"

"Never mind, John," whispered Curry, "I'll fix it," and he speedily severed the cords that bound the couple before he added: "Now see here; you know me, an' that I never break my word. I give you just five minutes to tell your story, an' if you don't finish by that time, I'll give you both a good ducking at the horse-pump! Now, then, go ahead."

"Then they're gone?" tremblingly asked the old woman, glancing around the room.

"What do you mean? There's nobody here but your friends."

"The men with black skins all over their faces, who stole our horses, an' then 'cause Jemmy shot at them an' hollered, tuck an' tied us up this a-way, an' then left, tellin' us if we hollered out or tole anythin' about them, they'd come back an' burn us up," sputtered the worthy mother Moss.

"Go look in the stable, Wakes, and see if the horses are really gone," ordered John Lansdown.

The man departed, and soon returned with a confirmation of the story. The men glanced at each other for a few moments as if puzzled, and then Curry said:

"Do you know which way they went?—and how long since was it?"

"'Bout half an hour, I calc'late, an' up the road, as I jedged from the hosses' feet," promptly replied Jem.

"Then there's no use going any further, for they're miles away before this. I move that we go back and give the other rascals their dues, and be done with it. No need to spoil another day," said Lansdown, thoughtfully.

"But, John, it's only to be a whippin', isn't it?" interrupted farmer Curry. "You know we've no positive proof ag'inst 'em."

"A good sound thrashing, and orders to leave the country," sternly said the leader; "and worse if they're caught around the neighborhood afterward. Even if they're not guilty of horse-stealing, they're a disgrace to any community. They haven't done an honest stroke of work for the past year, and only lay around the Bullard's tavern, gazzling and playing cards with any one that chances along. What do you say men?"

"Serve 'em right!" was the general verdict.

"Will you go along, Moss?"

"I dassen't leave mother all alone here," muttered Jem.

"I'm goin' too!" quickly chimed in the old woman, her ready wit understanding the meaning of the dubious glances passing between the borderers at her sour tone, more than words. "You don't cheat me outen seein' the fun, that-a-way. Besides, I couldn't sleep now, a'ter bein' 'bused so, an' them fellers, I know, b'long to the same gang."

"Wal, then, if you'll go too," said Moss, as he perceived the drift of her meaning, "why, I'll be on'y too glad. I al'ays did hate that Joe Morey, anyhow. But drat the luck, my hosses is gone, an' it's too fur to walk."

"Never mind that," interposed Curry, "you can ride double, for I suspect the ride will do you considerable good."

Moss did not reply to this innuendo, and in a few moments more they were trotting swiftly back toward the tavern kept by Ike Bullard, at the cross-roads called the "Traveler's Rest," where the three prisoners, Joe Morey, Alex. Woody and Jake Markle were in confinement, awaiting the punishment sentenced them by the enraged Vigilance Committee.

As they drew rein in front of the door, the tall, muscular Boniface appeared and warmly greeted them.

"So you've come back to visit my boarders, hev you? I 'xpect they'll be mighty glad to see you so soon, fer they're awful discontented back thar, a-cussin' an' a-yowlin' like mad! But, come in an' take so'thin'; it's free bar to night, you know, ef you're goin' to git red o' them three pesky bummers. They've driv away more travel'n thar dratted hides is worth ef sold at a dollar a pound!"

It is hardly necessary to state that his offer was freely accepted by the majority, while the more sober-sided ones produce the instruments of torture—long, supple sprouts of hickory, cut in the woods opposite, while yet other detached rope halters from their horses, to be used for seizings.

The three men were brought forth, and the sentence once more announced to them with a recommendation to observe the injunction to the letter, if they had any regard for their well-being. Markle and Woody listened in moody silence, but Joe Morey spoke in a bold, defiant tone:

"Look here, John Lansdown—for I know it's you that is at the bottom o' all this fuss—you'd best think twic't afore you do this. I hain't got nothin' ag'in' you so fur, but ef you dar' to whip or hev me whipped, I'll be even with you if it costs me my life the next minute. Ed wasn't proof ag'in' a bullit t'other night, nor I don't think you be nyther. I never yit hed to pull twic't on any critter, an' I give you warnin' now that if I am tetcht with them sticks, I'll pull trigger on you afore a month goes by. Thar now, put that in your pipe an' smoke it!"

"Come, men, let's get this over with. Will anybody volunteer to use the whips, or must we draw straws?" asked Lansdown, not heeding the threat.

Volunteers were not wanting, for many were there who had been deeply injured by the outlaws, and although it was not positively known that the prisoners were of them, still suspicion pointed strong against them. The three Rauschelbachs, father and sons, were finally selected, and when the victims were securely lashed to the fence they plied the terrible withes with strong and willing arms, until the allotted number was fairly enumerated.

But terrible as the torture must have been, not one of the three men flinched or emitted a single groan. Even their judges were forced to admire their pluck and endurance. Then their bonds were cast off, and after swallowing the generous draught of liquor handed them by the landlord, the three mutilated wretches silently picked up their clothing and with one long, deadly glare at their torturers, vanished in the gloomy night.

Then the Vigilantes slowly dispersed, and wended their way homeward, feeling now that the reaction had come, that they had been too hasty and severe in thus meting out punishment where guilt was not fully established. Not one among them but what remembered Joe Morey's threat, and this, coupled with the deadly, vindictive glare of the three men as they turned away, whispered that the last of the tragedy was not yet; and they were yet to hear more of it.

And they were right.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNEXPECTED GUEST.

THE house of "the widow Sherwood" presented a bright and attractive appearance on the evening of the quilting-bee. Each window was illuminated, and down along the avenue were hung curious and grotesquely fashioned lanterns, the handiwork of Nettie, the quadroon and old James. Within the building, the mirth and enjoyment was in perfect keeping.

The great dining-room had been stripped of its carpet and furniture, with the exception of a few chairs, and thus converted into a ball-room. The smooth, hard floor of polished oak was pronounced "just the thing," and two sets were now dancing a quadrille to the lively, stirring music of a couple of violins, the only instruments the neighborhood afforded.

The large folding-doors leading into the hall were thrown open, and a little group of spectators were there congregated, eagerly watching the dancers. Foremost among them, leaning against the wall, were Isabella Sherwood and Edward Lansdown. They had just finished their dance, arranged a week before, and were conversing in low but animated tones.

Edward excelled himself upon this evening, as, dressed in a neat, tasty suit that set off his tall, handsome form to advantage, his face flushed with pleasure, either from the dance or the gracious words and glances of his beautiful

companion. Isabella, too, appeared in her element, and many were the whispered comments of the spectators upon their appearance or of what a splendid match they would make.

"Alice does not appear to enjoy the dance nearly as much as she anticipated," murmured Isabella in a low tone, flashing a quick glance at her handsome cavalier, and then as she met his admiring gaze, drooping her lustrous eyes with a slight flush.

"Do you think so? I hadn't noticed."

Then they watched the light, fairy-like form of the girl as she moved gracefully through the figure. Dressed in pure white with her yellow-brown hair floating loose, Alice appeared but a mere child beside her tall and somewhat gawky-looking partner, who seemed to think the main point in dancing was to crowd the greatest possible amount of work into the shortest time; with a broad smile upon his freckled face, or a loud laugh at his own wit as he addressed some particularly funny remark to his partner."

But Alice, in truth, did not appear to be in the best of spirits, although she had anticipated so much enjoyment at the party; and more than once a soft, unconscious sigh rose to her lips as she noted the eager devotion paid to their lovely hostess by Edward Lansdown. Since his arrival, her cousin had spoken scarce half a score of words to Alice, although they had not seen each other for three days.

Poor girl! although as yet unaware of it, Alice was fast becoming jealous of the brilliant, fascinating widow, who appeared in no wise to underrate the young farmer. Brought up together from childhood with Ed, Alice had insensibly learned to love him with far more than a sister's love, although had she been told so the idea would have been ridiculed—at first.

Of no real relationship, she looked upon him as an elder brother, while day by day he was growing more dear to her and twining himself more closely around her heart. Alas! she little knew the grief and woe she was laying up for herself, or that the time was close at hand when the scales would be suddenly dashed from her eyes and the bitter cup pressed to her lips.

"Mrs. Sherwood," eagerly whispered Ed, "they have nearly finished. May I claim the next dance?"

"Really, Mr. Ed—ah, Mr. Lansdown—"

"Please don't change it; the last name sounds so formal," interrupted the young farmer, earnestly.

"On condition—that you follow my example," blushed the lady, yet with an arch glance into his sparkling eyes.

"Isabella—may I?"

"As you have, why, yes, Edward. You know we are to be brother and sister—why not? But really, you must excuse me this time, for I am engaged to—somebody, I forget his name."

"Well, then, the next?"

"If you wish it. But now go and secure your cousin Alice for this set. She needs cheering up, poor girl, and who is more accomplished in that art than—Edward?" and Isabella dwelt upon the name with a soft, musical cadence that caused the young farmer's heart to bound with a wild, delirious pleasure, and his eyes to flash a burning glance of love upon her, that caused her eyes to droop, and a flush to mantle her cheeks and brow.

Evidently the rich widow was in love with the stalwart settler, or had some object to gain in causing him to think so. At all events she had made rapid progress upon a short week's acquaintance.

Edward sought Alice and found that she was disengaged—for "out West" it is not the custom to secure the dance long beforehand, but to wait until the preceding one is over—and in a few moments they were standing up, with their hostess for a *vis-a-vis*.

"And how is my little cousin enjoying herself?" he kindly asked, as the head couple led off.

"Oh, very much!" but she ended with a sigh, and then came their turn.

"Is not Isa—Mrs. Sherwood charming this evening? What a gloriously beautiful woman she is. I have never met her equal," whispered Edward, enthusiastically.

"Yes, she is, and as kind-hearted as she is lovely."

"Alice, what do you—how would you like to have her for—a sister?" stammered Edward, in a low tone.

"A sister! Oh, Edward, surely you haven't—do you really mean that you have—?" faltered Alice, turning pale, catching her breath convulsively.

"Asked her? Not yet, and may never do so,

but the thought just happened to strike me, and I spoke without thinking. But who knows? Stranger things than that have happened, and I suppose it's our natural destiny to marry and be married," with a little laugh. "Why, pet, I expect to dance at your wedding before we're a thousand years older."

"Don't, Edward; I shall never marry!" murmured Alice, in a pained tone.

"Just look, Alice," resumed the young man, "at Mrs. Sherwood! Is she not grace itself? She moves like a snow-cloud. You know what we've always said, Alice, since we could first remember—that we'd always live together and keep house, and how deeply in earnest we were? Well, I have never met with but one woman who could cause me to forget that promise, and her name is Isabella Sherwood."

Then the set ended, and Edward conducted the pale-faced girl to a seat, and after a few wandering words, while his eager eyes were roving about in search of Isabella, he caught sight of her queenly figure, and quickly pressed forward to her side. Poor Alice!

Mrs. Sherwood had fulfilled her promise of sending over a span of draught-horses to farmer Lansdown, which the proud settler had at length consented to work, as his crops were behind-hand already, and he was too straitened in money matters, to be able to purchase others to replace the two stolen animals. The widow called every day while taking her habitual ride, meeting John Lansdown, interesting him as she had done the others; a feeling that increased and grew more strong at every meeting.

Then several days before the party was to come off, Alice was induced to accompany her home for a week's visit, and had been, in fact, the master-spirit in arranging the "quilting-bee," and sending invitations to the males for the dance and supper. Acting by her suggestions, based upon an intimate knowledge of the neighbors' habits and peculiarities as well as the country usages, Mrs. Sherwood had succeeded admirably throughout the day, and bade fair to continue so until the end.

At about eleven o'clock they adjourned to supper, Edward conducting Isabella, and Abram Leigh, her tall, gawky partner of the first set escorted Alice. Then came the remainder, in couples, or *pell-mell*, but all in the highest spirits, talking, laughing, jesting, and evidently enjoying themselves hugely.

The eyes of such as had not already obtained a furtive peep at the table, opened wide with wonder and astonishment, and a number actually paused to stare in open-mouthed bewilderment at the flashing, glittering display of silver, china and cut-glass. Such a sight had never before been heard of in that new and primitive country.

Of what the table was composed, none could tell, as the snowy damask descended to the floor upon either side, but that it was substantial, was plain, else it never would have borne up under the weight. Upon them were the plain wholesome food the company were accustomed to, even down to corn-bread, or "Johhny-cake." This last was Alice's idea, for she knew a meal without that, to more than one of the rough, sturdy settlers, would be a failure.

Mr. Sherwood had yielded to her in everything, and it was well that she did so, for ignorant of the customs of "the folks out West," she would have gotten up only the usual light repast of pastry, cakes, etc. But when Alice affirmed that fully one half of the guests would abstain from eating more than a mere lunch at home, for the sake of indulging heartily in the "good things at the party," she resigned the task of arranging the supper, to her guest, in despair.

There were huge roasts of beef and pork, baked beans, roast turkeys and chickens, cold boiled ham and even hot vegetables, corn-bread, and "shortened biscuit," with a huge bowl of basty pudding, or "mush and milk," strong coffee and tea, such as was not an everyday treat to the majority.

James and his worthy spouse, Aunt Medora, the cook, with the two others, Nettie, the quadroon, and a comely mulatto, Jenny, were neatly dressed and waiting with an alacrity and handiness that astonished the natives. More than one furtive glance of wonder and even admiration was directed toward the brilliant, stately quadroon by the settlers, both young and old.

In truth, she was dazzlingly beautiful, with a taint of barbaric splendor, and but one there present could successfully vie with her in beauty and regularity of features—the hostess. Unusually tall and superbly developed, with a lithe and lissom grace in every movement that rendered her figure perfect.

In her glossy black hair, wound round her head, and loosely covered with a kerchief of green and gold silk, and her features olive tinged, but through which could be plainly seen the rich mantling blood, there was no trace of the black taint that had rendered her existence a curse instead of a blessing. She was neatly, almost elegantly dressed in a dark, maroon-colored fabric, that set off her form to advantage.

But there was a sullen, smoldering fire in her great eyes, that would occasionally emit a vindictive glitter whenever resting upon her mistress's face, that told of deep and deadly passion raging beneath the surface, that would, in the right time, burst all restraint, and perform its work all the more surely for being so long held in subjection; and then woe be unto her enemy!

The main supper being over, the tables were quickly cleared and the dessert brought in. Pastry and conserves, with sparkling wines that still further increased the wonder of the guests. But when they tasted the ices, was the climax. Very few of the guests had ever heard of, much less tasted it, and in their simplicity thought it a kind of custard. More than one pair of eyes watered, and set of teeth throbbed at the unexpected morsels of frigidity; but the first surprise over, the "frozen victuals" was in great demand.

The mirth and merriment were now at their height. During the more substantial business—that of clearing the first table—conversation had been temporarily suspended, but now tongues were loosened and wits sharpened—whether by the aid of the subtle wine, or otherwise, is an open question, and jests were bantered back and forth.

Swains grew more bold, and audaciously pressed the little hand of the adorable, under cover of the table, and they, poor things, dare not resist for fear of attracting general attention, and could only retaliate by a gentle kick or a sly pressure of the foot upon his most sensitive corn. An unoccupied observer would have found a vast fund of amusement and instruction among the congregation; but such an observer there was not. All were engaged.

Just then came an interruption to the sport, and one that insensibly cast a feeling of constraint, if not positive uneasiness over the spirits of all present. A sharp rap was heard at the door, and before James could answer the summons, it was forcibly thrust open and a heavy tread sounded along the hall, and paused at the open door of the room.

All eyes were turned toward the entrance and fixed curiously upon the figure that stood there. It was that of a man, young and handsome, despite the general disorder of his attire; and the large dark eyes roved around the room with a searching glance, while a peculiar smile curled his mustached lips as his gaze rested upon the face of the fair hostess.

As she turned to glance at the intruder, her arm was carefully cast over the chair-back of her partner, Edward Lansdown, and only his ear caught the smothered moan as of mingled pain and fear as she saw who it was. Quickly turning toward her in alarm, Edward noted with astonishment the look of horror in her eyes as a dull leaden pallor overspread her face and her breath came in quick, sobbing gasps.

"Mrs. Sherwood, you are ill—can I—"

"No, no, it is only—nothing but—pour me a glass of wine please," she faltered in broken tones as her eyes half closed.

There was one other upon whom the sight of this man worked a sudden and terrible change, although, among the confusion none observed it, unless indeed the glittering black eyes of the stranger did. When Nettie, the quadroon, glanced toward the door, the tray she was carrying slowly sunk to her side, the contents sliding unheeded to the floor, making no noise upon the thick carpet.

The smoldering fire suddenly sprang into full blaze in her great eyes, and gleamed with the intensity of deep and fervent passion; either of hate, fear or love. Her face flushed deeply, and then the color died out, leaving a ghostly pallor, that was still further enhanced by the writhing features, that for the moment were rendered absolutely hideous. One clasped hand sought her bosom and clutched at the dress as though it was choking her.

Through all this the stranger stood there with the careless sneering smile upon his bronzed features, and one hand, white and shapely, and crossed with more than one flashing gem, combing his long silken beard as he indolently leaned against the casing. That he was an unwelcome and well known guest seemed plain, and still

more evident was the fact of his knowing it, and not caring that such was the case.

Mrs. Sherwood was the first one to move. Quickly draining off the glass of wine handed her by Edward, she arose and slowly crossed the room toward where the stranger was standing. His eyes followed her every motion, but he did not move or speak until she extended her hand; this he clasped, and retained as he stood erect.

What was said between them none but themselves ever knew. Evidently it was something pleasing, to judge from the smile of the man as he replied. Mrs. Sherwood's face was turned away from the company, but Edward fancied he could detect a slight convulsive shudder agitating her frame at the words.

Nearly a minute was thus consumed, and then, still holding his hand, Isabella turned and approached her guests, he doffing his hat and carelessly shaking back the clustering curls of jetty hair.

"My friends, allow me to present you my brother, whom I thought still abroad."

The man bowed deeply, and, with what Edward thought, a mock politeness.

"You must have noted how bewildered I was, and no wonder! he gave me such a scare!" added the hostess, with a little laugh.

"You always were so timid," Bella, returned the gentleman, laughing. "I dare wager you thought it my ghost, double, or something of the sort. But, sister, if you and your friends will be so kind as to excuse me for a few moments, I should like to make a little change in my toilet. I have ridden hard and far to-day."

Most persons would have thought him a handsome and agreeable spoken person, but the young farmer did not. Instead, he felt convinced that there was something wrong underlying the polished exterior, and a false ring to the low mellow voice.

"You will return, then?" and the close observer already alluded to fancied that there was a strange lack of sisterly joy in the tone of the speaker, that sounded more as if she preferred he should answer in the negative.

"Will I not? I have changed but little, if any," Bella, and you surely have not forgotten how extravagantly fond of dancing and pleasure I was in the 'good old days when you and I were young.' And I am almost famishing, too, for I have eaten nothing since early morning."

"Come, then, I will light you up."

"Let James or one of the others do that; you should not leave your company on my account. Nettie—"

"No, I will go myself, Nettie is needed here," and a quick spasm shot across her face.

"Then if you will, all right. But Nettie, my girl, surely you have not forgotten me?" he added, in his low, soft tone that yet rung out clear and distinct as he advanced with outstretched hands.

The quadron shrunk slightly back, and shot a quick glance toward her mistress, who was watching them with bright eyes and a set smile. Then she clasped the proffered hand as she murmured:

"Nettie *nebber* forgit, mas'r!"

"And never change, either, eh? You look as bright and enchanting as ever," laughed the man as he turned toward his sister, unconsciously chafing his hand, around which still showed the prints of the almost fierce grasp of the quadron.

"I will be back in a moment, friends, but don't wait for me. Mr. Lansdown, will yourself and cousin be kind enough to act in my place for a moment?"

Edward bowed and then the strange couple, brother and sister, left the room and passed together up-stairs. A cold chill seemed to have been thrown upon the spirits of the company, and led by Edward and Alice, the majority speedily sought the drawing-room, and with some delay, sets were formed, the music struck up, and the sport began anew, with fresh vigor and fast-increasing delight on every hand.

In ten minutes the cloud had vanished except from the faces of two: Alice, who had been "under the weather" all the evening, and the young settler, whose mind was still dwelling upon the strange reception Isabella had afforded to her brother. He could not help thinking that there was more foundation for her deep and sudden agitation than lay in the cause adduced. But what could it be?

It was nearly an hour before the two came down-stairs and entered the ball-room together. The man still wore the same clothes, but they had been brushed and neatly arranged. Instead of the heavy riding-boots, he wore a pair of light slippers that seemed as if his sister

might have owned them, they were so small and dainty.

Seen now with the stain of travel removed, he appeared wondrously handsome, even beautiful, for a man, and with his slight, graceful figure richly and elegantly dressed, it is little wonder that more than one of the rustic belles' hearts fluttered with anticipation, and their cheeks flushed as his dark eyes roved over the assembly.

"My good friends—for those of my sister should also be mine—Bella was so agitated at my unexpected arrival that she forgot to announce my name, so I will have to introduce myself. Jerome Malleville," with a low bow and winning smile.

"But sister, you know my old failing, and really I must dance. Please introduce me," he added, glancing toward Alice, who was still with her cousin.

Isabella took the hint and introduced him to both Alice and the young farmer; the latter of whom received him somewhat coldly, but it was not noticed, and then the four stood up in the same set. When they sought their seats after this was over, Jerome Malleville still remained with his fair partner, evidently quite well pleased.

"Miss Walker, I must thank you a thousand times for your kindness to me, a stranger. I have not enjoyed a dance so greatly for ages!" he began, somewhat enthusiastically, which fervor, if assumed, was very good acting; but she was considerably awed by the polite, handsome stranger, and very far from feeling at ease in his presence. So it was with considerable relief that she listened to his next words.

"I fear you will think me very familiar and troublesome, Miss Walker, but my excuse must be in my being a perfect stranger here. I dare not ask you to dance again so soon, and must not defraud others more worthy of that honor. So if you will be kind enough to introduce me to some of your lady friends it would be a great favor. I see Isabella is dancing again, so I cannot rely upon her."

As Alice arose to fulfill his request, he added, pleadingly:

"But first—tell me if I may hope for another set or a waltz with you? Please say yes!"

"If you wish it, then, yes. But I never dance, except quadrilles," murmured Alice, more confused at his manner than anything he had said.

"A thousand thanks! And now, if you will," and he was soon busily whispering his sweet nothings in the ear of a rosy, blushing country lassie, while those not so favored cast many an anxious glance toward them.

Shortly after this Mrs. Lansdown arose to go, and drew the hostess aside.

"Alice had better come with us now, Mrs. Sherwood. You have company, and would prefer, naturally, to be alone with your brother."

"But indeed now, my dear Mrs. Lansdown, she must not go," protested Isabella, earnestly.

"Why that would be too bad! The poor girl has not had one bit of pleasure yet, and has been working like a slave to get things in order for to-night. It will be different now, and she needs relaxation so much; she will be ill if she does not rest. Please say she may stay!"

"It don't look right, but if you really wish it—"

"Indeed I do!" and so the matter was settled.

Had they but known what the future was to bring forth, how different would both have acted. Isabella would rather have cut off her right hand than to have urged the favor; and Mrs. Lansdown would have suffered the same torture rather than to have granted it. And yet perhaps it was best so.

Not until the gray light in the east announced the coming dawn, did the party break up, for "out West" pleasure is like work; they throw into each all their energies, and work or play with their whole heart. The sun was peeping over the hilltops before the mansion settled into repose.

Edward rode slowly homeward with his heart beating fast and his brain in a whirl, for he had parted upon very friendly terms with the widow, and bright fancies filled his mind. He found everything quiet and as usual.

Evidently something had occurred to disarrange the plans of the Masked Outlaw.

CHAPTER VI.

THE THUNDERBOLT.

It was three days after the memorable party, and the sun was just hiding its crest behind the tree-crowned hilltops. Edward Lansdown and his father were busied in feeding the stock and

performing the thousand and one chores that constitute a farmer's evening task, when they were startled by the quick, irregular thud of a horse's hoofs, apparently approaching them at full speed.

Simultaneously an exclamation of horror broke from their lips, and, with one accord, they dashed toward the road. Indeed they had good cause for alarm and wonder.

Along the level road dashed the snorting, terrified gray horse that they had learned to know so well, and there, seated upon its back, was its usual rider, Isabella Sherwood. But instead of her customary erect, firm seat, she swayed to and fro as if at every moment she would lose her balance and be hurled with fearful force upon the hard ground.

Her hat was gone, with the long black hair floating in wild profusion, and her habit was disordered and torn. It seemed as though she was making fruitless attempts to check her steed's wild career, and this was the cause of the irregular hoof-strokes.

Uttering a cry of encouragement, the young farmer darted to the fence, and with a wondrous power, cleared it at a bound, alighting before the runaway. Then his strong grasp upon the bit bore the horse's head down and to one side, running him up in one corner of the rail-fence.

"Quick! father, take the horse; she's fainting!" cried Edward, as he sprung forward, just in time to catch the drooping form of Isabella in his arms, as she reeled from the saddle.

"My God! she's dead—they've killed her!" groaned the young farmer, as he pressed his lips to her brow, where was a large discolored lump, evidently caused by some severe blow.

"Mother—mother!" called out the old farmer, loudly, that speedily brought his wife to the door of the cabin. "Fetch your camphire bottle, quick! Mrs. Sherwood has fainted."

In a few moments the long silken lashes were faintly raised, and the dark eyes flashed a startled glance up into the face of the young farmer, who still held her tightly clasped to his breast. She started, as if wishing to arise, but he restrained her and she sunk back once more with a low sigh, and nestled still closer to his broad breast, murmuring:

"Where am I—what is the matter?"

"Hush, darling," whispered Edward, not heeding that other ears were within hearing. "You must be quiet; you have been hurt badly, and then fainted."

"Oh, I remember now; those terrible men!" shuddered Isabella, catching her breath; then starting up she glanced wildly and confusedly around, crying:

"But Alice—where is she?"

"Alice!" hoarsely demanded John Lansdown, his face paling, while the other two stood as if petrified. "Alice—what of her—what do you mean?"

"Oh, my God! then it was true!" moaned Isabella, bowing her head upon her hands, her form trembling like a tempest-tossed bush.

"What is true? Mrs. Sherwood, compose yourself and tell us quickly what has happened," added the settler, with great calmness.

"She's gone—stolen away—they've carried her off!" sobbed Isabella, bursting into a torrent of tears.

"Wait a bit, father," whispered Mrs. Lansdown, "she'll come out of this in a minute, and then will be able to tell all. Oh, Alice, my poor, poor girl, what has happened to you?" she sobbed, but all the time kept trying to restore Isabella to her senses.

John turned to Edward and said:

"Go quick and saddle the horses—we may need them. There's been black work going on here, and by the Eternal, I'll clear it up, and woe be unto those who have harmed my pet!" and the strong man, fully aroused, strode fiercely to and fro in the road, trying in vain to control his passions.

"My God! Mrs. Sherwood, *can't* you speak and tell us what has happened?" he almost howled, clenching his hands until the nails brought the blood through the thick, toil-hardened skin, in his agony of rage and apprehension.

"Now, John, let me manage her. You only frighten her and make it still worse," said the wife, now the calmest, outwardly, although her weak frame trembled and shook with suppressed emotion.

"Mrs. Sherwood, Isabella, look up and recollect yourself. Don't you know us? We are all friends here, and no one will harm you here. Think, and tell us what has happened to Alice."

"Then they—they're gone!" murmured Isabella, glancing fearfully around as if in quest of

some dreaded object. "Oh, that dreadful, terrible man!"

"Yes, yes; they're gone—there's no one here but us. Tell us what has happened—how did you get hurt?"

"Yes, he did it—that fearful man, with the black mask!"

"Ha! the *Masked Outlaw*!" cried the farmer, starting forward.

"Yes, he struck me, because I would not go, with a pistol, I think, and—I don't remember—my head swims and throbs so!" murmured she, her eyes again closing and her head drooping forward.

The family fairly howled with suspense, and Mrs. Lansdown pleaded once more with lips that almost refused their duty.

"But Alice—where is she? Did she go out riding with you?"

"Alice?—yes, she was there—wait, I will recollect all in a moment," said the widow, reflectively, placing her hand across her brow. "We went out riding, she and I, with Jerome—yes, I remember now! We were riding along, not thinking of danger, when a crowd of men broke out from the woods before us, and seized our horses' heads.

"One of them knocked brother down, and then they took Alice from her saddle. Another—a fearful-looking man with his face hidden in a black mask—tried to make me dismount; I struggled and shrieked for help, and struck him with my whip. Then he let loose, and, with a pistol, I think, struck me here, on the temple, a fearful blow. It must have alarmed my horse, for he broke through them and dashed away. Then the next I can remember is being here with you," concluded Isabella, with a sobbing gasp and pressing a hand to her swollen forehead, as if bewildered and in pain.

"But where—where was it—the place, quick!" cried the farmer, as his son appeared with the horses.

Isabella stared at him with a wistful, vacant air, and then Mrs. Lansdown added, in a soothing tone:

"Don't be frightened, my poor child; he means where were you when they attacked you?"

"I—I don't know—my head—" gasped the widow, and then once more swooned away.

"Look, father, there comes Malleville!" cried Edward, spurring forward to meet a forlorn-looking man who was running along the road toward the house.

It was indeed Jerome, with torn and soiled attire, and with a little rill of blood trickling down his face from beneath his crushed hat. As he noted them, he waved his hand with a faint shout, and then sunk down, breathless and panting.

"Quick!" gasped the old farmer, "where did this happen, and where did you leave my child?"

"My sister—is she safe?" uttered Jerome, pressing a hand to his side, as if in pain.

"Yes; she is well; but where was the place? Tell—or better yet, come and show us," said Edward.

"I am faint and worn out; I can't walk, but give me a horse and—"

"Here, man; jump up and lead the way as though the devil was driving you!" and the old farmer, with a gigantic struggle, tossed the young man into the saddle of his own horse, and then gave him two fierce slaps upon the hip that caused it to snort with alarm, and then dart madly down the road.

"Go on, Ed, I will catch you," shouted Lansdown, and then rushing to where the gray horse still stood, he quickly tore off the side-saddle, sprung upon its back, lashing it furiously with reins and halter, and soon overtook the other two men, who were spurring along through a cloud of dust.

Jerome soon found breath to tell the story, that coincided with the statement of his sister, adding that he was robbed and left for dead or insensible, but that he had watched the direction taken by the marauders, and then hastened as quickly as possible for assistance.

"But did you not recognize any of them?" asked Edward.

"No. You know I am comparatively a stranger here, and besides, they all wore thick black hoods over their heads and faces. All except one, and he, whom I judged to be the chief or leader of the gang, had on a close-fitting mask."

"But their shapes, forms, or voices—?" impatiently interrupted John Lansdown.

"I remember nothing of either. You forget that I could only have a very imperfect view of them, for I was senseless most of the time, and

such a blow as I received is not the best receipt for quickening one's wits," with a short hard laugh.

"It is idle to talk—we must act!" sternly added the young settler. "And we will act! I for one, swear never to think of aught else, never let another purpose come between me, until Alice is found, and these devils punished as they deserve. We have had enough cause, before this outrage, to hate this man, Masked Outlaw, Black Rider, or devil, whichever he may be, and will see how much longer he can defy all honest men. The *Vigilantes* will have little time for rest now, father!" with a harsh, bitter laugh.

"Look! there is the spot—just at the foot of the little rise yonder!" exclaimed Jerome, pointing forward; and the next moment the three men abruptly drew rein just without the circle of confused and mingled footprints.

"Don't spoil the tracks, boys; we may learn something from them," said the old man, as he threw himself from his horse and bent over the ground. "I see no woman's tracks here; how is that?" turning to Jerome, who was bending low in his saddle.

"I don't know, sir; they certainly pulled Miss Alice from her horse. Perhaps they carried her to where their horses were concealed. I heard hoof-strokes soon after they left the road," thoughtfully replied Jerome.

"Get down, Ed, and help me; your eyes are keener than mine, and it is getting dark. Let him hold the horses and wait until we come back."

The young man passed both halters to Jerome, and then carefully scrutinized the ground. He soon passed from the road along the trail, that was clearly defined, as though a considerable party of both horse and foot had pressed through the tangled undergrowth. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation of joy, and held up a half-worn shoe.

"See, father, do you recognize this?"

"It is hers," muttered the old man, taking it, while a large tear dropped from his eye. "Curse the tears! I mustn't begin making a fool of myself this soon!" he exclaimed, as he angrily dashed the unbidden visitor away. "He was right, Ed, they have carried her. Lead on."

In a very few moments they once more paused at a spot where the soft earth was deeply cut and scored by the hoofs of horses, and from this, together with the closely-clipped bushes and low boughs, it was plain that a considerable time had been spent there. Around, too, could be seen the spots where the men had reclined or sat upon the ground; here was a little pile of whittlings, there a castaway quid, and there a little heap of ashes, evidently knocked from a pipe-bowl.

"They took it cool enough, curse them!" growled the old man. "But it's a good sign for us, anyhow. They must have been well acquainted with the habits of the widow Sherwood, and knew that she generally chose this road. Look well, Ed, at the tracks. Mayhap you can get some clew there."

"But if it is as you think, father, why should they wish to take Alice away? What object would they have in doing that?"

"The Lord knows, I don't," groaned Lansdown. "I didn't know she had an enemy in the world, poor—Ed, Ed, come here quick!" he added, in a low, eager tone.

"What—what is it?"

"Look!"

"By the Eternal, father, you're right! I know who made that print," cried the young man, bending over a plainly defined foot-track. "There never was such another foot in all Kansas as that!"

"You think it was—"

"Joe Morey, the man you whipped and drove away from the settlement. God forgive me! but, father, I believe that but for you, this fearful thing would never have happened. He swore to be revenged upon you, and this is his first blow. I said at the time you were too hasty; that you would yet regret it, and see! my words have come true," sadly said Edward, rising erect.

"I fear you are right, son, but I thought it was all for the best. You see now that he deserved far more than he got. He must have belonged to the gang, or else why is he here with this cowardly devil who hides his face from the light of day?"

"Well, it is too late to regret now; we must work—work night and day until we get the poor bird out of his power! He is a devil now, if ever one wore human shape. You help Jerome with the horses; or no—see, it is getting

too dark to follow the trail!" cried Edward, gloomily.

"What can we do, then?"

"Listen; do you go and arouse the neighbors, and send off a portion under Curry to beat over the country and hunt up news. Then you come here with others and follow me up. Bring lanterns and plenty of arms. Give me your pistol; I may need them both before you get back," hastily added the young man.

"Here, then; it is fresh loaded. But, how will we find you? Follow the trail?"

"Yes, but wait; I will blaze the road, then you will not be delayed. But go, now, and ride as for your life!"

"I will be back here in an hour at furthest. Be careful, Ed, and remember how dear you are to us, and what would become of mother if any thing should happen to you," and then, with one hand-clasp, the old farmer dashed back to the road, followed by his son.

"Wait, father," he said, "I will take Queen with me. I may need her; and now, go."

As the two horsemen dashed away, Edward set to work in earnest. Quickly stripping a segment of bark from a linden tree, he built upon its hollowed side a small fire of twigs and dried bark, that soon emitted a bright light; then whistling to his well-trained mare, he entered the woods and sought the spot where he had left the trail. Then holding his novel lantern low down, so that its rays were cast upon the ground, he slowly moved forward, followed closely by the snorting mare, now and then pausing to crash down a pendent bough, or break over the top of a bush, thus "blazing" the trail for the convenience of those who were to follow.

Thanks to the recent rains that had moistened the earth, Edward made rapid progress despite the difficulties he labored under, and traced up the marauders' trail foot by foot, yard by yard, for over a mile. Then he paused, with a bitter oath.

His suspicions, that had been awakened by remarking the course taken, were now confirmed. Before him, and running at almost right-angles with the trail, there gleamed the bright waters of one of the many creeks or "branches" that intersect the country in every direction. The trail led directly into this, and was lost upon its shallow, gravelly bed.

Despondent, yet resolved not to give up while there remained the faintest shadow of a hope, the young settler spoke to Queen and then commenced a systematic search along the banks of the creek. Down one side and up the other he searched for half a mile in either direction, but without success. Then, as he returned to where he had left his mare, he heard the shouts of men, and the advancing lights told him that his father had returned with assistance.

They required no explanation; all saw at a glance what was the obstacle, and knew that it was one they could not hope to surmount in the darkness. Then, after a significant pause, John Lansdown spoke:

"We can do nothing here now, Ed; we must wait for day. It won't rain, and early in the morning we will come and hunt it out. Now we must ride hard and far. Not a house or a mile of ground must be left unsearched, and perhaps we may ferret out some of the devils. Curry has taken the west and south; let us go in the other direction. Come on!"

And under guide of the two bereaved men, the little cavalcade dashed away at reckless speed, little caring either for their animals or their own persons, for the most of them would have dared fire or death for the sake of the gentle, loved girl who might even now be calling upon them for help to preserve her from death—or worse!

The majority we say, for alas! even among that little band there were traitor hearts and lying tongues!

The gray light of dawn found them still in the saddle, jaded and worn, but more especially the father and son, who not only suffered bodily, but in mind as well. They knew enough of the nature of Joe Morey to tell that there was every thing to fear if indeed their surmises were correct and he was the prime mover in the abduction.

Outwardly a good-humored and devil-may-care sort of fellow, the blackleg, as all knew him to be, when aroused could be a demon incarnate. His threat delivered after being so cruelly scourged was no idle one; they knew that he had the nerve and daring to commit any thing, however desperate or atrocious. Then what must be the position of the poor helpless

girl, one so near and dear to his enemy that a blow dealt her would not miss scathing him?

The sturdy form of the old farmer trembled as he thought thus, and his heart sickened within him.

"Neighbors," said he, in a harsh, dry tone, as though his throat was parched, drawing rein once more at the point in the road where the assault had been made, "you have been very kind, and I thank you. I won't ask you to do anything more now, for I know that your families are anxious about you, as well as that you must be pretty well worn out. But Ed and I must keep on. Alice is somewhere and must be found before we rest."

Several of the party declared their intentions of continuing the search without delay, among them being the young man Jerome Malleville. The remainder promised to resume it after a rest of their horses, a precaution that was greatly required.

"No, my young friend," said John Lansdown turning to Jerome, whose haggard face, yet blood-stained, and swaying form, told how hard the unusual toil and trouble had borne upon him, "it will not do. You would only kill yourself, and do no good. You are not fit to be out now, and unless that hurt of yours is attended to, it may end seriously. Besides, remember your sister."

"But I can't rest until she—Miss Alice—is safe among her friends once more. It seems as though I was in some measure to blame for it, although God knows I would have died rather than harm should come to her, if it could have been!"

"You will die, and that without assisting her in the least," kindly returned the old man, affected by his manner. "But if you go home now and recruit your strength, then you will be ready to take up the search when we give out, for, God help us! I fear that is what it will come to!" ended the farmer, with a deep groan of agony.

Without more words the young man turned his horse's head and rode slowly homeward, bowing forward and reeling like a drunken man.

John Lansdown, his son, and two of the neighbors who would not desist, left the road and followed the blazed trail to the creek where it had been lost on the preceding evening. Then they separated, and leaving their horses so as not to be impeded, two going up and two downstream, one upon each side, closely and minutely examining the soft, loamy banks for signs where the marauders had left the water.

First one of the scouts uttered a cry that announced a discovery, and the other crossed to learn its purport. *It was the trail of a single horseman.*

It was traced for a few yards from the creek, and then the spot marked. In a few minutes—upon the opposite side—a similar discovery was announced. But as before, it was only one set of tracks. Yet again and again was this the result.

Edward and his comrade met with precisely the same experience, discovering five separate trails. It was evident to all that an old and experienced hand was in control of the abducting party, and as at every turn this fact became more evident, their hopes grew more faint, and their apprehension increased in like proportion.

Then they once more met at the starting-point to compare notes. All had the same idea.

"Let us each take one of these trails and follow it to the end. It is our only chance," gloomily observed John Lansdown, with a heavy sigh.

This they did, taking their horses. Slowly and systematically they traced them out, one by one. Those who were longest found their comrades awaiting them in sullen despair. The trails all joined again at one point, but that point?

It was at the edge of a long ridge of thick, rocky shale. A regiment might have passed over it without leaving a sign or a trace by which to indicate their course.

"My God!" groaned the old man, in agony, that one at least of the three others fully appreciated, "what can we do now?" and his stern resolution gave way, and sitting down at his horse's feet, he wept long and bitterly.

CHAPTER VII.

"JOE MOREY, HORSE-THIEF."

A WEEK, a long, sad, dreary week, full of grief and despair to the bereaved ones, had elapsed since that day on which the trail of the marauders had been lost. A week that had wrought the work of years in aging the looks and breaking down the spirits of the stricken

family. A week that had made many a change, sad and painful, there, but that had brought no light upon the dark mystery that enveloped the fate of poor little Alice.

Steady, unrelenting search had been kept up, resulting only in disappointment. Almost constantly, day and night, had the two men kept the saddle, scouring the country far and wide, aided by the neighbors at first, but who gradually dropped off, worn out or discouraged, until only the good farmer Curry and Herculean Mart Miller, whose heart was as gigantic as his body, remained with the two, undaunted and resolved to discover the missing one, dead or alive.

Poor Mrs. Lansdown, yet weak and feeble from her long illness, took to her bed, and, as the doctor said, was dying of grief and suspense. Isabella Sherwood was her daily companion, and tenderly nursed her friend, but her care and attention were divided by illness at her own house. Jerome Malleville was reported in a precarious situation, from the effects of his injury, added to the anxiety and fatigue he had undergone, and the good old Doctor Flynn shook his head doubtfully, when questioned regarding him.

It leaked out somehow—most probably the report could have been traced up to the doctor's worthy spouse, who was greatly given to tea-drinking, and the pleasant gossip attendant thereupon, had any one set their wits to work—that the poor fellow raved continually about his Alice, his sunny haired angel that he had lost, pleading pitifully for her to return to him, for that life without her presence was a horrible, dismal blank. And many a kindly tear or sigh were dropped over the sad trials of the lovers, as they were now pronounced to be, by all, and prayers that all might end happily.

Thus the days rolled on, and no fresh tidings greeted the anxious queries whenever two persons met. Nothing could be learned, and the majority of the settlers were convinced that further search was useless. Time and again had the streams and ponds been dragged, and every mile of the country searched with painstaking care.

Neither had any thing been seen or heard of Joe Morey and his two comrades in hiding, as well as guilt, Alex. Woody and Jake Markle, although search had been made far and wide for him. And yet all this time he was lying in concealment at scarce a mile from Lansdown's farm, chuckling in high glee over the daily reports given them by Jem Moss of how matters progressed upon the outside. For they had found refuge in the underground apartment at the farm-house, where we have seen the outlaw band in session.

There they took their ease, smoking, drinking or playing cards, eating and sleeping, with an occasional run through the woods on some dark night, by way of exercise. The time that dragged so wearily to the others, passed pleasantly enough to them, for they were provided with all they required by no less a personage than the Masked Outlaw, in consideration of the essential service they had of late rendered him.

Nor were they disturbed by the remainder of the band, for, upon some account, the periodical meeting of the league had been suspended, perhaps from fear of discovery by the Lansdowns and their friends. Only being visited by mother Moss and her son, their whereabouts a profound secret from the remainder of the band, who thought that they had left the country immediately upon their last exploit, they were at full liberty to concoct their plans and schemes for the future.

Prominent among these was revenge. Joe Morey had solemnly sworn to accomplish two things, if his life lasted long enough, and his two confederates had promised to carry them out if he should fail. One was to compass the death of John Lansdown, to whose influence they attributed their late punishment and present confinement; the other was to steal Queen, the black mare of Edward, which he had long coveted, but feared to steal because she was so well known.

But now he would risk it, as they would be obliged to leave the country anyhow, to escape the storm that would ensue if the respected farmer was murdered. They were discussing this subject upon the afternoon in question.

"But, Joe, how'll you manage, anyhow?" observed Markle, after a pause, consequent upon Morey's declaring his intention of risking the attempt upon the coming night.

"Well, I'll tell you. Both Ed and the old man will sleep sound as a top to-night, and won't think of watchin' the stable, for the band has been so quiet they've almost forgotten them,

thanks to this last trick of ours. First I'll make sure o' the critter an' then git outside o' the lot. D'y' see?"

"Yes, go on."

"Well, then, I'll begin yellin' for the old man—with my pistols all ready, mind ye—until I wake them up. Soon's they open the door I'll yell out somethin' 'bout the gal's bein' found, an' for them to hurry down to the barn. That'll bring 'em, of course, an' then—well, you have seen me pull trigger afore, an' know that when I spot a feller, it's all night with him," concluded Morey, with a fiendish chuckle, as he played with his revolver; a Colt's "navy," and, in practiced hands, as deadly a weapon as a rifle.

"'Twon't do, Joe," chimed in Woody; "they'll know your voice, an' they're some on the shoot, too. Anyhow, I wouldn't care about standin' up afore them, no more would you."

"Bah! loony, can't I put a couple o' bullits in my mouth? besides, they'd be too much flustered to think about it's bein' me," sneered the ruffian.

"Well, it may work, but look you, Joe, if it fails, why here's two more chances to depend on. If I die for it, the old cuss has got to pay for them stripes with his life's blood!" gritted Markle in a low, deadly voice.

"An' a'ter you, me," quoth Woody.

"Well, I know you'll stand good to your words. But now let's snooze, for if it does come off, we'll need to ride hard and fur before day. An' if the other—as it may turn out—why, I'll go to the devil wide awake."

It was just dusk when a closely-muffled figure stole out from Jem Moss's house, and crouching low down among the tangled weeds, quickly gained the growing corn, through which he passed to a point where the dense woods grew close up to the fence. Scaling this, Joe Morey, the horse-thief—for it was he, bound upon his mission of plunder and bloodshed—plunged into the underbrush and rapidly made his way toward the Lansdown cabin.

He knew the ground well, and did not falter or pause until the fence of the stable-yard was reached, near the point mentioned in our opening chapter. Here he paused to examine his pistol, removing the caps, picking the powder into the tubes and then replacing fresh ones, pressing each one firmly into place with the hammer. Evidently he meant business.

Then he crawled through the fence and crept along under cover of the corn until the rear of the stables had been reached, now cast into a deep shadow. Entering the lot he reached the building, and after some time and pains loosened one end of a slab so that he could enter the harness-room, which was an addition built onto the main stable, communicating by a door.

Crouching close down, the thief listened with breathless attention, his hand upon the ready pistol, for signs of human life; but there were none. All was silent save the sound of horses grinding their evening meal of corn. Then he advanced, inch by inch, until he had traversed the stable and assured himself that no person was within but himself.

With a chuckle of delight he arose and sought the stall usually occupied by Queen; but his joy soon changed to chagrine as he found it empty. A minute sufficed to assure him that the mare was not in the stable, and for a moment he paused to deliberate as to what course he should pursue, muttering low but deep curses.

"Durned if I don't see it out, anyhow! Shorely he won't stay away all night, seein' he's bin up the last two, an' he must hev some sleep. I'll take the loft an' wait; then if he don't come, why I'll fix the old man anyhow."

To decide was to act with our worthy horse-thief, and he nimbly mounted the rude ladder leading into the hay-loft, where he was speedily ensconced in the warm nest, covering himself with the dried, sweet smelling grass to avoid the ravenous mosquitoes. He had not very long to wait, in reality, although it seemed hours to his excited imagination, as his nap during the day made him unusually restless and wide awake.

He uttered a low snarl of joy as he heard a noise at the stable-door, and then it opened to admit Edward Lansdown and his mare, Queen. She was quickly unsaddled and secured in her stall, and then Morey expected to hear the young farmer retire.

But such was not the case. There was no fresh hay in the rack, and thinking first of his favorite's comfort, the weary and jaded man slowly mounted the ladder, *coming up into the stable-loft!*

This move took Morey by surprise, and he was not in a favorable position, should discovery follow. Still he dared not move, lest the rustling hay should betray his presence, and his

hand stealthily sought the fatal pistol; although he was fully resolved not to come into collision with Ed if he could avoid it. Had it been the old man—

But he had no time for further thought. Edward groped around and soon found the pitchfork, with which to handle the hay. He raised it up, and then brought it down forcibly.

A queerly sounding noise followed; a gritting of steel, scraping against or penetrating bone—then came a mingled howl of pain and fury.

The sharp tines of the fork had pierced the right hand of the concealed horse-thief!

For a moment startled, the young settler still held the fork firmly; but then as he felt the vigorous kicking of a man's foot, and the unmistakable clutch of a strong hand upon his leg, the truth flashed upon his mind, and dropping the handle, he threw himself upon Morey, clutching him fiercely by the throat, and at the same time shouting loudly for assistance.

But for the fortunate thrust, that moment would have been the last upon earth for the fortunate settler, but the strong tines rendered the hand powerless, still holding it buried in the hay. Upon the other arm Edward knelt, while his long, muscular fingers were wound tightly about Morey's throat.

That worthy struggled fiercely, but vainly; fate was against him. Upon more even terms his great strength and adroit suppleness might have prevailed over the wearied and weakened frame of the young settler, but now he was fast succumbing beneath the deadly pressure, and his senses were rapidly leaving him.

In answer to the continued shouts of Ed, there came the reply of his father, who rushed from the house, bearing a lighted lantern.

"Where are you, Ed, and what is the matter?" he exclaimed, in an alarmed tone.

"I'm all right; but look out, there may be more of the devils down there!"

"What is it, then?" gasped the agitated farmer, as he reached the ladder.

"It's a man, I know, and a horse-thief, I guess," replied the young man, as he slightly relaxed his grasp, feeling the form growing limp and nerveless beneath him. "Hurry up, and let's see who it is."

The old farmer quickly turned the light full upon the face of the prisoner. It was a fearful-looking sight; the face swollen and blackened, the eyes protruding frightfully from their sockets, and with the tongue lolling from the foam-stained lips, Joe Morey did not present his usual trim, jaunty air.

"My God! father, it's Joe Morey!" gasped Edward, sinking back in astonishment. "Quick! help me down with him to the water. If he dies now, then poor Alice is indeed lost!"

The insensible horse-thief was quickly lowered from the loft, and then conveyed out to the horse-trough, that was full of water. The cool liquid was dashed into his face and over his shoulders with no sparing hand, and by its aid Morey gradually returned to consciousness.

"Where am I—what's happened?" he gasped, wondering, at the same time clutching nervously at his throat, now greatly inflamed and discolored by the powerful grasp of the sturdy young settler.

"Oh, you devil you!" foamed the old man, "where's Alice? What have you done with my child? Tell me quick, or I'll tear your heart out and thrust it down your foul throat!"

Joe Morey glanced at him for a moment; then a look of deadly hate changed into one of fiendish malice and gratified revenge. Edward noted this, and read it correctly; so he muttered, in an undertone:

"Don't provoke him, father, just now; wait until he recovers a little, and then he may tell. He may fear death more then."

"You're right, Ed, as you always are," more calmly added the old farmer. "But, where shall we stow him—here, or at the house?"

"Better take him to the tavern, I guess, and put him in the cellar." Then adding, in a whisper, too low for the prisoner to hear, "We must try to make him confess, and mother must not hear him."

"Ha! look out, Ed!" cried the old man, as he sprung forward and lunged out viciously with his powerful arm.

The cause of this was a sudden movement by Joe Morey. Owing to their excitement, and the apparent debility of the prisoner, they had neglected to bind him, and knowing full well the fate that awaited him if brought before the Vigilance Committee, the rascals determined to risk all in an attempt at revenge and escape.

His keen eye noted the revolver at Ed's side,

and with this once in his possession it would go hard but he would free himself. So, with a quick, steady thrust forward of one hand, he clutched the weapon, while with his foot he adroitly tripped up Ed, sending him headlong beneath the water-trough.

Had it not been for the watchful eye of the elder man, he would doubtless have succeeded completely in his desperate attempt. But ere the pistol could be cocked for use, the hard, heavy fist of the farmer crashed with fearful force between the eyes of the outlaw, felling him almost senseless upon his back, where he was quickly bound, hand and foot.

"Get the light wagon out, Ed, while I go dress and tell mother what is up. We'll do as you said, and take him over to the tavern."

"Well, but hurry."

In ten minutes the two men were seated in the light spring wagon, driving rapidly toward the "Traveler's Rest," while the bound form of Joe Morey, the horse-thief, bounced around most uncomfortably in the bottom of the wagon. As they neared the tavern, it was plain that there was a goodly gathering at its bar, judging from the loud and confused sound of voices issuing from the open door.

"Give them a yell, Ed, and let them know we're coming."

In obedience to the young settler's clear, ringing halloo, the door was filled with curious heads, eager to know what good move had caused the joyous cry. Mart Miller's sonorous voice soared above the rest:

"What's up, Ed, that you squeal out so peert? Anythin' new?"

"I guess so; we've got one of the devils, sure's you live!" cried the young man, excitedly, leaping from the wagon. "Caught him in our stable-loft, too!"

"Sho! you don't say! Any one we know?"

"Come out here, Joseph Morey, Esquire, horse-thief, kidnapper and so forth, and allow the light of your beautiful countenance to shed its luster over these, your good and true friends," laughed Ed, dragging the prisoner forth by the feet, and then pushing him forward where the light shone full on his battered and swollen features, by no means improved by the last blow he had received.

"Look here, Ed Lansdown," he said, in a tone that betrayed no trace of rancor, "I goes in for every man's enjoyin' hisself, and if so be it'll please these here fellers, why they can look at me from now till to-morrow mornin'; but if so, let me hev a cheer to set on, for I'm mighty nigh worn out. An' to pay for it, why I'll give you a speech—'The last dyin' speech an' confession of Joe Morey; the notorious horse-thief an' counterfeiter!—that's my style!' summed up the bold, reckless fellow, with a defiant laugh and a volley of curses.

"I'm durned ef you shain't hev it, old feller, and a rousin' snort o' whisky into the bargain!" exclaimed Mart Miller.

"Let them be, father," whispered Edward, as the old man made a motion as if about to interfere; it's the best way after all. If treated kindly, he may confess, but threats will never do any good, and only harden him. The brute knows no fear!"

The prisoner drained the glass of fiery liquid that was held to his lips, and then sunk down into the chair placed for him by Miller. Then Edward Lansdown stepped forward to his side, and said:

"Now look here, Joe Morey, we've played the game nearly out, and luck is against you. If you act on the square and make a clean breast of it like a white man, why, I give you my word that you shall be allowed to go free and unbound, so far as what you have already done is concerned. Of course, if you make any more trouble, there must come another settlement. Now what do you say?"

"I can tell you better when I hear what it is you want to find out," leered the outlaw, impudently.

"First, where is my cousin Alice?"

"I don't know," slowly answered Joe.

"Be careful, my friend; we know more than you suspect, and nothing but the whole truth will aid you. You were with the gang that carried her off."

"How d' you know that?" sharply demanded Morey, looking full at his interlocutor.

"Look down at your feet, and you can guess. Did you ever see their match? You left a plain enough print where you sat smoking while waiting for the women to come along."

"Thunder, Ed, but you are a sharp one!" ejaculated Morey, admiringly. "Well, then, I was along."

"Then why do you say you know nothing about her?"

"Jest 'cause I. I don't wasn't boss there, an' I never set eyes on her a'ter we struck the branch."

"Who had her then?"

"The Masked Outlaw, as you calls him," after a short pause as if for thought.

"You must belong to the band; then where would he be most apt to hide her?"

"Look here, Ed Lansdown, don't throw all your cards to one't. I hain't said that I belong to this gang, nor I won't say it, 'tither. But if I did—mark me, I say supposin' I *did* belong to it—why, I'd see you all essentially and eternally cussed fust, afore I'd peach, and then I wouldn't! I may be low enough, an' mean enough, an' all that, but please the pigs, I'd never be sich a dratted puke as to split on them as trusted me!" firmly and defiantly responded the prisoner.

"Hang the rascal—string him up and shake the truth out of him!" was the general cry, and a fierce rush was made toward the captive, foremost among whom were John Lansdown and Abner Curry.

"Back, men!" he shouted; then adding in a quick voice, "tell me where Alice is, and I'll save you yet."

"I couldn't if I would for I don't know. Let 'em rip, Ed, an' git it over; it's bound to come to that, yit," coolly replied Morey.

"Stand aside, Ed," ordered his father, hoarsely; "we'll make him confess."

"Dew tell!" drawled Morey, in a sneering tone. "I want tew know!"

Edward no longer sought to restrain the crowd, but, exasperated himself at the reckless obstinacy of Morey, joined with the rest, although resolved to prevent murder at all risks. He thought that possibly, under the terrible torture about to be inflicted, the outlaw's resolution would be broken and he would confess all; and if so, he resolved that the promise he had given should be fulfilled to the letter.

A strong rope was quickly provided, and thrown over the sign before the door; the slip-noose was cast over Morey's head, and a dozen hands grasped the other end. Edward stood near, with a keen knife in his hand, ready to sever the rope if such a course should be rendered necessary. The signal was given, and the slight figure of the outlaw was swinging between heaven and earth, the bright lights plainly revealing his convulsed and horribly-distorted features.

Then he was lowered to the ground, and as Edward supported him from falling, the question was again repeated.

"It's no use, Ed," gasped Morey; and then as he regained his breath, he added in a defiant tone: "You might as well end it at once, boys, for it'll do no good if you keep on foolin' all night. I hev nothin' to confess, an' if I *did*, I'd see you all—" and the sentence was suddenly checked, as he was once more swung from the earth.

Once more he was lowered and elevated, and now the stern vindictive glances of the settlers told that all mercy was banished from their hearts; that the outlaw's doom was sealed. But not so Edward Lansdown.

He still hoped to gain the confession, and leaping high into the air, he drew the keen blade across the straining rope. It parted with a sharp twang, the men holding it being cast to the ground in a s'rugghin' heap, while the young settler supported the limp, senseless form of the outlaw back to the chair, and then, with revolver in either hand, cocked and leveled, he shouted:

"Back, men, I tell you, stand back! You know me, and I tell you that so sure as there is a God above us, the first man that lays hands upon Morey dies!"

His stern, resolved tone awed them far more than did the gleaming weapons. The young settler was a general favorite, and it was well that such was the case. Had he not been, now that their angry passions were in full play, the end must have been terrible. In their fury, both would have been sacrificed; they paused and listened to reason.

"I have my reasons for this, men; I hope to get him to acknowledge all, but if I fail—if he continues obstinate, then I will be one of the very first to say, give him the punishment he deserves!"

"The boy is right, by mighty!" exclaimed Mart Miller, and he ranged his Herculean frame beside Edward. "An' them that says no must git over me fust!"

It was the signal for reaction, and the horse-thief was saved for the present.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEATH SHOT.

LONG ere the sun arose, the bar-room of the "Traveler's Rest" was crowded with settlers; the news of the capture of the horse-thief, Joe Morey, having spread far and wide. Mart Miller was there, and having taken a strong fancy to the prisoner from his audacious behavior of the preceding night, he declared the poor devil should not be hung without a good square meal first, and notwithstanding the opposition of the others, he opened the door and lifted the wretched-looking captive out from his prison.

Morey was placed upon a chair and his hands released, but the bonds still remained upon his feet. Evidently the night's confinement, and the torture of the preceding night, had not subdued the spirits of the outlaw, for he glanced around and saluted each member present, as though he was conferring some great honor, instead of being the condemned criminal. He called for a glass, and as a small pocket-mirror was handed him, he took a long survey of his battered and bruised face, then breaking into a clear laugh as he smoothed his tangled beard, he muttered:

"That is a sweet-lookin' figur'-head o' yourn, but, Joe, old boy, it 'd 'a' looked a heap sight wuss if you 'd 'a' danced on nothin' out thar all night!"

"By thunder! Joe Morey, you sh'ud hev a week fust for that, ef nothin' else!" exclaimed Mart Miller, admiringly.

"Mebbe 'twouldn't be wise, old man," coolly added the prisoner. "You know I strained that rope o' yourn last night, n'arly as much as it would b'ar, an' if I git a good squar' meal now, I'll break it shore!"

While he was still eating heartily, the two Lansdowns arrived, and Ed once more tried to persuade him to tell them where the stolen girl was hidden.

"Now, look here, Mr. Lansdown," earnestly said Morey, pausing to reply, "you acted the gentleman and a white man's part last night, an' I am thankful for it. If I knowed whar she was, I'd tell you 'bout axin', now, a'ter that. But as true as I live, I don't know no more'n you do."

"But you helped to take her away," persisted the young man.

"No, I did not."

"But you acknowledged it last night!"

"I said 'at I was with the gang you follered, an' so I was. But, young man, you follered the wrong trail!" slowly uttered Morey.

"The wrong trail? but, then, which was the right one?" faltered the astonished Edward.

"Now you stops me. I said I wouldn't peach on the gang," obstinately declared Joe, "an' I won't nuther. I admit that I b'long to the band led by the feller you know as the 'Black Rider'; I admit stealin' your two horses, an' a hundred more, for I know that you fellers mean to hang me anyhow, an' 'twould be a pity if you didn't have some excuse for doin' of it. But I won't betray them as trusted me—so thar!" and he once more resumed his eating.

"You cursed lying dog!" howled John Lansdown, pressing forward, knife in hand. "Tell me whar Alice is, or I'll—"

The settlers all endeavored to restrain the frantic man, who seemed endowed with more than human strength, and while they were thus engaged, Joe Morey cut the bonds that held his feet, sprung from his chair, grasped a revolver from the belt of one of the settlers, and then, before any one divined his intention, or indeed perceived his action, discharged it full in the face of the old man, so close that the flames blackened his face and singed his beard.

Then plying his heavy weapon as a club, he dashed those aside that were before him and leaped out into the open air, running down toward the cornfield, uttering a wild cry of defiant joy.

With a shrill cry of agony, the tall form of John Lansdown tottered and fell, the hot life-blood gushing from his face and dyeing the hands of his son as he grasped at his body. Then Ed knelt over the ghastly form, heedless of all—heedless that the murderer bade fair to effect his escape—heedless of all save that his loved parent lay there before him, dead or dying.

It was an exciting scene without. First came the nimble form of the flying fugitive, speeding toward the friendly cornfield, where he might hope to successfully baffle pursuit; next came the gigantic settler, whose ill-timed clemency had been the prime cause of all this; and after them came the rest.

A short two hundred yards was all, and then came the field.

Twice did Mart Miller snap his pistol, twice did it fail, and then with a bitter curse he hurled it after the fugitive. It struck fair between the shoulders, knocking him down, but before he could be overtaken, Morey was up and away.

The pistol was regained, and once more hurled, with the same result. This time Morey dropped the revolver with which he had shot his enemy, and dared not stop to recover it. Mart Miller snatched it up and fired.

Joe Morey gave a low cry and staggered, but still kept on. Then the spell seemed broken, and a rattling volley was sent after him by the pursuers. He staggered and fell.

But again he was up and then the fence of the cornfield is reached. He dragged himself half over. Mart Miller paused and took a quick deadly aim. The revolver cracked spitefully.

* This may sound strained and unnatural, under the circumstances, but it was actually the remark made by the person from whom this character is drawn, while in the same situation, and will be recollected by scores of people.—AUTHOR.

Morey gave a wild yell and rolled over into the field; then he lay still. His race was run, yet he glared vindictively at his pursuers, as they tenderly lifted him up and conveyed him back to the house, showering faint but horrible curses upon his destroyers.

Upon examination he was found to have received *thirteen* wounds, most of them through the body, and yet he still lived!

The worst passions of the settlers were now aroused, and they thought not of mercy. A rope was procured and hastily cast over the sign. Morey watched all their proceedings with a sneering, defiant smile upon his lip, despite the agony of his wounds, that were fast draining his life away.

Edward Lansdown, having found that his father still lived—although the will of the outlaw had been good enough, his purpose had failed, the missile merely shattering the farmer's jaw and passing out at his neck—and in a fair way of recovering his senses, once more joined Morey and pleaded with him, promising him life if he confessed.

"Is the old man dead?" eagerly whispered Joe Morey.

"No, nor will he be for many a long year yet!"

"Curse the luck! then the others must make my oath good. But you promise me life—look yonder!" and he pointed to the swaying rope, adding: "But I would not live if I could. See! you would have shot me to pieces—I should be a cripple for life; why should I wish to live? No, no, finish your work, hang me, burn me, what do I care? But be quick, or I shall cheat the rope yet!" and he uttered a faint, husky laugh, even while the death-rattle almost choked him.

"Come," growled Miller, suddenly pushing Morey with his foot, "it is time."

"Men, the poor fellow is dying now—let him breathe his last in peace!" cried Edward, imploringly.

"No, no, he must hang, and if you know when you're well off, you'll keep a still tongue," yelled the crowd.

Still resisting, several of them now seized the young settler and held him, while others lifted the dying man and placed the rope around his neck. He was raised from his feet, but from some cause, was lowered, and two of the settlers stepped up and supported his form.

At this moment, a clear, sharp report was heard from the cornfield opposite, the blood spouted from a tiny, round hole in his forehead, and Joseph Morey, the horse-thief and outlaw, dropped forward, dead! He had indeed cheated the rope.

A small curl of blue smoke slowly floated up from the cornfield fence, and indicated the spot from whence the death-shot had been winged. As soon as their stupor would allow, the settlers seized their arms and dashed toward the spot. But they soon returned, having traced a man's footprints from the point, to where he had mounted and fled upon horseback. They decided that it must have been some one of the outlaw's companions in crime, and who feared the suspicious movement portended a confession, and so fired the death-shot to preserve himself.

CHAPTER IX.

"THE OLD, OLD STORY."

THE days and weeks rolled by, and matters once more resumed their old course at the settlement, bringing joy and hope to one, grief and despair to others, as from time immemorial.

The general bustle and excitement, consequent upon the mysterious abduction of Alice Walker, and the tragic events so closely following it, had died away into comparative quietness. The general belief was that she had been murdered, and all traces of the crime so effectually removed that not until Judgment Day would the mystery be revealed. And so the majority allowed the matter to rest; the majority, but not all.

Edward Lansdown could not rest idle while the fate of the kind, gentle girl that they all loved so well, was uncertain, and he wandered far and wide, like a modern Ahasuerus, with despair and gloom filling his heart, and almost without a hope of ever succeeding in his quest. He did not abandon it even for a day, something goaded him on, until he only found rest in the saddle of his faithful Queen, whose spirit was undaunted, although the satiny shine of her coat was gone and the ribs stood out prominently.

Edward Lansdown was sorely troubled. He remembered the oath he had taken, never to rest, never to think of aught else until Alice, the lost one, was found. And yet he caught himself continually breaking this; he daily wrestled against a power stronger than himself.

It was the old, old story; he was in love. He denied it to himself persistently, almost fiercely, but yet the words would return, and he would arouse himself with a start, to find himself dreaming of love, forgetting Alice, his vow, everything but Isabella Sherwood.

From their very first meeting he had been strongly drawn toward her, and fascinated by her beauty, grace and enchanting voice. He never mentioned the word, love; it was simply admiration for her loveliness, respect for her strong good sense, a sincere and Platonic friendship; that was all. But he often caught himself contrasting their situations in life, so different and far apart, and wishing that their lots were changed—that he was rich and she poor—but there he ever ended, or rather paused.

But, as they continued to meet, his thoughts became more confused and his resolution weaker. Day by day those wondrous eyes, the soft winning tone, the lovely face, or the magnetic touch of the cool, velvety white hand, strengthened

the chains that bound his senses and his heart, until he could no longer blind his eyes to the real truth.

Mrs. Lansdown had sunk beneath the shock, and grief had brought on another attack of her old malady, a remittent fever, that her weakened frame was unable to conquer. John Lansdown was yet disabled from steady work, by the severe wound he had received at the hands of Joe Morey, the outlawed horse-thief, and but for the kind assistance of Mrs. Sherwood, their future would have been gloomy indeed.

The proud spirit of the farmer was sorely humbled, and after some resistance he allowed the fair benefactress to have her own way, but only upon condition that she would accept one-half the crops as her share. To put him at ease, Isabella consented to this, and then hired hands to work the farm, superintending it herself until the farmer was strong enough to be about. Most of her time was spent there, and several of the neighbors were uncharitable enough to hint, more or less openly, that the "widder was a-settin' her cap for proud Mr. Ed-ard."

But be that as it may, by means of this arrangement, the young couple were often thrown together, and truly, she did not act very chilling or reserved toward him. Often he would have to escort her home in the evening, and during their long, quiet walks, it was one constant, killing struggle to keep the hot, burning words of his love from overleaping their barrier; and yet these were the most happy, deeply prized moments that he knew, and throughout the long, weary day, he looked forward to them as the sweet, deserved reward of his toil.

One calm, lovely evening, Isabella and Edward left the Lansdown farm-house, and, arm in arm, slowly walked down the road toward the dwelling on the knoll. He was gloomy and silent, as usual, while on the contrary, Isabella appeared very happy and gleesome, though in a quiet subdued way that was usual with her when with the young settler.

"Oh, Edward, I received a letter from my brother to-day; Jerome, you know," at length remarked Isabella.

"Oh, did you, and is he well?" listlessly queried Lansdown.

"Yes, well in body, but sick at heart. It was in answer to one of mine, telling him, that as yet, nothing had been heard of our poor Alice," was the softly breathed reply.

Edward did not answer, but a half-stifled groan broke from his lips as he bowed his head.

"Now, brother"—the old compact was still preserved, although both well knew what a mockery it was—"I don't know what you will think, perhaps you will call me unfeeling and thoughtless—"

"I call you—" began Edward, passionately, but then he ceased abruptly.

"I know how you feel about this sad affair," she added, after a slight pause, as though waiting for him to complete his sentence, "and that it gives you pain to allude to it; but I thought best I should tell you. You won't be angry?"

"Isabella, could I be angry with you?" reproachfully asked Edward.

"I hope not, dear brother; but now listen. Do you know that I believe, really and truly believe, that had not Alice been stolen away so strangely, she would have been my sister before this time?"

"Your sister! Isabella, why, what do you mean?" exclaimed Edward, as if startled.

"Did you not notice how attentive Jerome was to her, from the time of their first meeting at my party?"

"Your brother—Alice? No, I did not; why, she was only a child!"

"Nineteen years make an old child, in our days," laughed Isabella, "and that was her age. But I am surprised that you should have been so blind. Or perhaps you know nothing of the symptoms?" with a quick upward glance at the somber face of her companion.

"As you say, perhaps. But go on."

"Well, I know that Jerome had taken a great fancy there, and I knew, too, that Alice liked him very well; more than that I could not get the shy little puss to acknowledge. But I saw more in her eyes and in her voice, when she spoke to, or looked at him."

"You partly know how terribly the blow fell upon him, when she was stolen, taken right from before his eyes, but you could not guess the half. The doctor said his long illness resulted mainly from the wound he had received upon the head; but I knew better. It was his heart that felt the deadliest blow. I learned the truth while nursing him through his delirium; he had but one plaint," softly spoke Isabella.

"Go on," whispered Edward; he dared not trust his voice further, for he was thinking of the pain at his own heart.

"It was that, I believe, that kept him down so long, and when he had recovered strength sufficient to be out of doors, and learned that all hope of discovering her was vain, it was that that drove him from the country. But now he says that he cannot remain away, that something commands him to come back; that he will be enabled to find her, if he enters the search himself. Poor Jerome, how I pity him!" sighed the widow.

"It will be useless," said Edward, despondently. "He will only meet with disappointment, as I have; she will never be found—alive! Can he do more than I have—than I am doing?"

"I know what you have done, brother, but I have more faith. I believe that Alice is still alive and well, and that she will be found in good time. But now, dear brother, do not misconstrue my words, or be offended if I speak plainly—will you?"

"Go on, Isabella. I could not take offense at anything you might say. Oh! if I could only realize—only read my—" but then he checked his passionate words and hastily averted his head.

"Read what, Edward? 'if I could only realize—'; will you not finish the sentence?" and the dainty hand clasped his arm more closely, and she drew more to him until he could feel the strong throbs of her heart against his arm.

"No, not now; in a moment, perhaps, when you have finished what you were saying."

"It is a promise, now remember, and I will remind you of it," archly said Isabella, resuming her former tone.

"Very well; it is a promise, but remember, that if it estranges us, you are the cause of it. I would keep it buried yet a little longer," with a strong but broken tone.

"Can anything estrange us now?" softly murmured Mrs. Sherwood. "I thought we were to be good and true brother and sister, forever. But I will risk that! Let me see; what was it I was saying?"

"About speaking plainly—"

"Yes, I remember now. I meant that I believed that Jerome would do more good—that he would search with more chance of success than you—"

"Isabella!"

"Please do not mistake me, Edward, or think that I doubt your love or sincerity; for I do not. Far from it! I know that you have done more—endured more than any other man could and not give way beneath it. But, dear Edward, I think there is a love that can accomplish more than that of a brother."

Brother, I believe that where a man loves a woman with his entire soul, that there is nothing save death that can keep them asunder. There is a bond, an instinct—I do not know what to call it, but you can understand what I mean—a something that will insensibly draw them together despite all.

"Now do you understand why I said that I believed Jerome would accomplish more than you—would succeed where you have failed? For I truly and firmly believe that Alice is alive, and concealed somewhere not far from us. I know that Jerome has that feeling for her, that he would die for her sake if need be, and I feel, too, that she reciprocates the sentiment," concluded Isabella.

"You may be right, Isabella. God knows I pray you are! but still I fear it is no use. I feel that Alice is dead—has been murdered! But who by, and for what reasons? that is what puzzles me. I know that she never wronged any one in thought or deed—she was too pure and good for that, my little angel!" and the strong man choked down a sob for the dread fancy conjured up in his mind rendered him weak.

"Could it not have been those men—the ones who were so terribly lashed? You know what they swore, and how desperately that poor fellow attempted to fulfill his vow," suggested Isabella.

"No, he told me with his dying breath—and I believe he spoke the truth—that he did not touch her—that he knew nothing of her except that she was in the power of that demon we call the Masked Outlaw, or the Black Rider. But you tremble—do not fear, darling; a thousand such should not harm you while I draw breath or can raise an arm," and he drew her closer to his side.

"I know that, dear brother, but any allusion to that dreadful man always causes a cold thrill of horror to run over me. But about Jerome—will you give him any encouragement? He said he fancied you had taken a dislike to him, from some cause," anxiously asked Isabella.

"It's true, Isabella, I did feel an aversion to him, at first, I know not why. It seemed as though there was something wrong or false about him; what, I could not determine. But it soon wore off, and when I saw his grief at Alice's disappearance I warmed toward him, and now I do not know one man whom I would sooner greet as a brother, than Jerome Malleville."

"Then I may tell him this?"

"Certainly, if you wish it. But see! here we are at the gate. I had no idea we had walked so far!" he abruptly exclaimed, coming to a pause.

"Yes, and it is late, too; but remember your promise—you do not escape without fulfilling that!" laughed Isabella archly, with a bewildering glance from her eloquent eyes into Edward's face.

He caught the glance, and drew wonderful assurance from it; an assurance that made his heart throb madly, for it told him that his secret was a secret no longer. That she knew what was coming—was prepared for his confession, and more. It told him that she was not angry—that she returned his love!

And yet he hesitated. She stood there, looking earnestly into his face, with a soft subdued glow upon her countenance, and a deep, thrilling light in her eyes. He quivered for a moment, and then spoke.

"Do you claim its performance, then, Mrs.—Isabella?"

"I do."

"Isabella, by so doing I break a solemn oath."

"If keeping it gives you pain, racks your brain and tears your heart, then it is a bad vow; and a bad vow, like a bad resolution, is better broken than kept."

And she looked steadily at him and smiled. A smile so tender so full of intense, yearning love, that Edward involuntarily recoiled as from a galvanic shock.

"If its telling would part us—would break our friendship?" he slowly uttered.

"Still you must tell it; but it will never do that, dear—brother."

"Not that name, Isabella, not that name!" he cried, winding his strong arms around her yielding form.

"What name, then, Edward? What will you offer in place of the brother of whom you rob me?"

"Listen and I will tell you all. I can struggle no longer, and it is not right that I should. I love you—love you alone, with all the strength and fire of my heart!"

His arms wound tightly around her supple, yielding form, and pressed her firmly, almost fiercely, to his strongly-throbbing heart. And she—her lips did not refuse love's tribute, and in her eyes, glowing and thrilling with a luminous light, Edward saw how deeply, how passionately he was loved.

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERIOUS NOTES.

ANOTHER week had passed by, and still nothing was heard of the missing girl. Nearly three months had elapsed since the memorable evening upon which the thunderbolt fell, and yet all was shrouded in mystery as at first. And still the young settler did not despair, nor totally abandon the search.

His exertions were now seconded by those of Jerome Malleville, who had returned, determined, as he said, to never rest until he had found and restored his darling—so he termed her—to her home, or had found such proof of her death as would place the matter forever beyond a doubt.

He was often at the farm-house, and by his gentle, winning ways had won the hearts of both the farmer and his wife, while Edward, who had at first regarded him with dislike, now looked upon him as a brother.

Edward had not yet told of his and Isabella's betrothal, acting upon her advice, that it would come too suddenly on the old couple who were mourning over their great loss, and would think they were heartless in dreaming of love and marriage while the fate of Alice was still undetermined.

The neighborhood was now unusually quiet and peaceful. Nothing further was heard of the Masked Outlaw and his gang of marauders. Alex. Woody had been arrested in Missouri for burglary, and was then imprisoned at St. Joseph to await his trial. And of the other who had joined in the oath of vengeance, Jake Markle, nothing was known, and honest John Lansdown had entirely forgotten the circumstance or remembered it only with a careless laugh, whenever he beheld the deep scar left by Morey's last shot. For a brief time Edward was most perfectly happy, basking in the sunshine of requited love, but often the shadow of Alice's mysterious fate would dim it, and then he would dash madly in every direction, together with his inseparable companion upon all his wanderings, Jerome Malleville, scouring the dense woods and through the rocky precipitous hill-passes; vainly searching for some clue to her fate.

Yet, on the whole, he was happy; but would it last?

One day as he stopped at the post-office, kept by Ike Bullard, in conjunction with the tavern, a strange-looking letter was handed him by the curious postmaster. As he glanced at the direction, an exclamation of wondering surprise burst from his lips, and no wonder.

"Mighty queer-lookin' epis'le, that thar, Mister Edward," quoth Bullard, peering curiously over the young man's shoulder. "It's plain enough to read, anyhow, but I calculate the pusson as sent it didn't study writin' overly much when he went to school."

"From Leavenworth—I wonder who it can be from?" turning it over and holding it up toward the sun, as we are all prone to do when puzzled.

It was a common yellow envelope, but the address, instead of having been written with a pen, was formed of letters cut out from some newspaper and carefully gummed on to form the requisite words.

"Better open it, hedn't yer? 'Pears to me like as if you'd find out that a-way, sooner, don't it?"

"A sensible remark of yours, Bullard, anyhow, and I guess I'll follow it," returned Edward, laughingly, but his fingers trembled, and a bright, wild light shone in his eye as he unfolded the sheet. He felt, as if by instinct, that he was about to learn something regarding Alice.

Both uttered another exclamation, for the page was filled with words formed from letters as the direction had been, gummed down, one by one.

The note ran as follows:

"You appear very easy consoled for the loss of Miss Alice, and I suppose you woodnt care much if you never herd from her agin now that you have taken to makin love to the widow sherwood she is only foolin you and if you take a fools advise youl give her the sakk before she dose you besides she is already married. Now how much wood you give me iff I wood tell you just wear Miss Alice is kep hid. I know the plase and if youl make it worth my wile will tell you as I ante got nothin lade up aginst you folks. He wants to make her mary him that's why they kepe her shet upp. If you want to know wear she is dropp me a note sayin what youl give. It wont do no good too try too find me out by goin to the PO for I know you aw and will be on my gard. Rite soon or not a tall. Your true friend, ALEXANDER DUMAS."

Despite the anxiety with which the contents of the strange missive filled him, Edward could not restrain a smile, as he read the signature attached, and wondered what that polished writer would think, could he see the composition thus foisted upon his name. This was quickly dispelled, however, and he started for his horse, and mounting, dashed swiftly down the road.

Edward soon reined in his horse to a slow walk, and again perused his strange letter. He knew not

what to think. One portion of it a lie—and that concerning Isabella was such, of course—could the rest be depended upon? He decided no, but at the same time resolved to trace it up, and find out who was the author.

Before he reached home he decided what to do. He would say nothing of the letter to any one, but would answer it, making a liberal offer, and would go down to Leavenworth to find out who called for the letter directed to Alexander Dumas. This plan he proceeded at once to carry out.

He told the family that he must visit Leavenworth for a few days upon business, and arranged it so as to start on the same day the semi-weekly mail left, knowing that he could easily hold his own with it upon his gallant Queen. Once there, he thought he could prevail upon the postmaster to allow him a station inside the office where he could see the person, without himself being noticed, by showing him the strange letter and explaining the case to him fully.

During his absence, events changed the tranquility of the settlement, and once more were the settlers enraged and greatly alarmed. In one night no less than five farm-yards were cleared of horses, and that, too, so silently that no one was the wiser until day dawned. The next night two more were robbed, and at one of them, the farmer who was lying in wait, had fired upon the marauders, killing one of them, and when the family gave the alarm to the neighbors, it was learned that the poor settler had been mortally wounded and left for dead by the enraged robbers.

He ived long enough to declare that one of them was the Masked Outlaw, and that during the struggle he had torn the hood from one of the others' head, recognizing him to be none other than Jake Markle, whom they all thought either dead or fled the country.

That same evening Isabella had been wounded in the arm with a bullet. She said she had been out riding, and was returning home, when her horse suddenly shied, and then a shot was fired from ambush. But that the start of the horse had probably saved her life, and the bullet merely scarred her arm. She had fled, and did not know, such was her alarm and confusion, whether she had been pursued or not.

All these outrages combined, so wrought upon the settlers, that they turned out *en masse*, arming to exterminate the gang if it took all the fall. But ride as they might, go where they would, their search was in vain. The marauders could not be found. Several of the settlers said nothing, but set off alone, by day or by night, to scour the country, to search among the forests or the hill retreats, but their exertions were unrewarded.

But leaving them for the time being, we will follow Edward Lansdown upon his "wild-goose chase," and see how he fared.

Arriving at Leavenworth, the young farmer immediately sought an interview with the postmaster, and after considerable difficulty, obtained that official's consent to the carrying out of his plan.

All day long he waited with an anxious heart, never leaving his post for a moment, lest "Alexander Dumas" should call and receive the letter during his absence, and thus render his scheme futile. The day passed, and when the office closed for the night, he went to his hotel with a downcast heart, cursing himself for being beguiled into such a nonsensical proceeding.

But, resolved not to give up while a hope remained, thinking it was for Alice's sake, he once more resumed his watch, this time with more forethought than before; he carried a substantial lunch, so that hunger might not again be added to his other trials. That evening, just before dark, a letter was handed him, taken from the receiving-box. It was a drop-letter, and directed as the other one had been, with printed letters, cut from some newspaper. He did not open it until safe in his room, and then his eager eyes rapidly deciphered the following note:

"MR. EDWARD LANSDOWN:—You ante quite so sharp as you think you be. I told you it would be no use too try too find me out until I was redly for you to do it now by rites I ott too let you find out wear Miss Alice is yourself seen you know so much but I wont if youl do as I tell you now but if you dont do it now then its all upp and youl never here from me no moar. Your watched the post offis is watched and you dont know who by if youl leve the City Ill git your leter and then see if Ill tell you wear she is iff you dont then its no use and youl never find out untill its too late."

"Your frend or not just as you ples,

"ALEXANDER DUMAS."

Before he slept that night, Edward had done what he should at first. He called on the chief of police, stated his case, and asked for a man who would not be upon regular duty the following day, but who would be willing to lose a little sleep for a good sum. The young settler had a fair knowledge of human nature, and had also a full purse, so that when he left the worthy official, his heart was lighter—and so was his pocket.

From the opening of the doors a policeman in citizen's clothes was stationed in the post-office in apparent idleness, but with ears that drank every name spoken at the delivery. Until mid-afternoon he remained upon guard without result, and was beginning to think that it was not such an easy task after all, when a person approached the delivery, and with head close to the aperture, spoke in a low tone.

"Speak louder, I can't hear you," returned the clerk.

The words were again uttered, but still the policeman did not catch them.

"Ah!" exclaimed the official, in a clear tone, "that's it, then. Yes, here's a letter for Mr. Alexander Dumas."

The letter was handed to the inquirer, and hastily taking it, she left the building, followed by the spy, who performed his duty well. It was dark before he called at the hotel, where Edward was anxiously awaiting tidings. He had left town as proposed, but returned by another road and changed hotels.

"Well, sir, what have you found out?" he exclaimed, as he pushed the spy a seat.

"Enough to satisfy you, sir, I reckon."

"Then you have found him?"

"Not exactly, but I've found her, for it's a woman."

"A woman! Are you sure?" asked Lansdown, in surprise.

"The one what got the letter was a woman, sure, but maybe 'twas for a feller; I don't know that."

"Well?" impatiently added the young settler.

"Well, I waited until 'most night, when a woman, dressed all in black, with a thick veil over her face, axed for and got the letter. Of course I folered her home and watched outside until dark, to make sure that she didn't come out ag'in."

"And this house—is where?"

"I'll show you at any time, but I must go on duty at ten to-night," added the policeman.

"Very well, we will go now. Here is your money and a dollar extra, for this last. Now come, quick!"

"All right, here I am," and the two left the hotel and strode rapidly along the dark streets.

Presently they paused before a small, dingy-looking house, and signifying that this was the place, the spy added:

"Do you want anything more, now, sir?"

"No, I will do very well; you may go, now."

"Well, then, all right, but mind, sir, the feller what is on this beat is a most onaccommodatin' cuss as ever you see. He'd jerk you up in a minnit."

"I will not give him the chance," and so saying, Edward knocked loudly at the door.

In a few minutes it opened, and a woman stood before him, holding a lamp. He instantly recognized her, and without giving her time to speak, he presse into the house, and closing the door, turned the key, withdrew it, placed it in his pocket, saying: "Monsieur Alexander Dumas, I am happy to see you!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE MASKED UNMASKED.

THE evening succeeding that upon which Edward met his mysterious correspondent was destined to be an eventful one to the personages of our story. And the first item was a figure, slight and graceful, speeding rapidly along the road leading to the Lansdown farm-house, into which it disappeared.

Half an hour later, John Lansdown came rushing out, fully armed, and pausing only to saddle a horse, he dashed at full speed toward the nearest neighbor's. A few quick words to the settler, and then onward to repeat the scene, while the man spoken to also armed and spurred away in hot haste. Evidently that figure had brought some deeply momentous tidings.

In less than an hour, fully a score of sturdy, determined men, all armed to the teeth, were riding up to the "Traveler's Rest," from every direction. As they came to a halt, a man slipped from the door and tried to slink away. But his maneuver was noticed, and Lansdown called out in a quick, sharp tone:

"Halt, you cursed horse-thief, you!" but the man only gave a long leap, and then darted swiftly away.

The farmer straightened his arm and glanced along the blue barrel of a revolver. Its report was mingled with a wild yell, and leaping high into the air, the fugitive fell to the ground; one convulsive quiver, and the limbs straightened out in the embrace of death. One of the settlers dismounted and turned the body over; it was that of Jim Moss.

"He doubly deserved it; he gives them shelter and information," sternly said Lansdown, and then they rode on at a rapid pace toward the farm-house of the dead traitor.

Pausing under cover of the woods, a short council was held as to the best course for them to pursue, and resulted as follows: they were to encircle the house, and then the main party would, by force or otherwise, enter the building. If the outlaws would surrender peaceably they were to be well treated, until they could be tried; but if a shot was fired, or a blow struck, then it was to be extermination.

No answer being made to their repeated knockings, Mart Miller burst the door open with one powerful thrust of his shoulders, and then the room was filled with the *Vigilantes*. A light was quickly kindled, and by its aid the door of the underground apartment was soon discovered, it not having been concealed as usual. It was thrown open.

The room was dark, save by the flickering rays of the one candle, but the crouching of a dozen forms, and the sinister gleaming of weapons could be seen, showing that although their prey was holed, it would not be taken without a desperate fight.

"You see, my worthy friends, you are in our power, and that resistance is useless. So now throw down your weapons and advance one at a time, and you will be treated well," called out John Lansdown.

"If you want us, you must come and take us!" was the reply, in the clear voice of the Masked Outlaw. "Fire, men, and then cut your way through them!" he added, in a tone of stern command.

But at the first words Lansdown had seen what an advantage the outlaws had over his party, owing to their being plainly revealed by the light, while

the others were almost invisible, and he quickly swung to the door of thick, heavy oak, just as the united discharge rung out. The force of the missiles was deadened, although several inflicted painful wounds after piercing the door.

"Start a fire, somebody, so we can throw it down among them," he shouted as he barred the door, just in time to resist the rush of the outlaws.

A large fire was hastily built upon boards, and pieces of fat pork, butter and oil placed on it, and then as the door was quickly opened, the blazing mass was hurled into the room. With wild yells the enraged settlers closely followed this novel lamp, and then began a fierce, deadly strife, in which quarter was never asked, never thought of, but each man grappled his foe in an embrace that was to end but with death.

The outlaws had all donned their sable hoods, at the first alarm, and consequently were easily recognized. The masked chief stood erect in one corner with revolver that never spoke uselessly, as yet unharmed, although the dead and dying were lying thick before him. Just then came an interruption.

Two persons rushed through the house and down into the *me*. As if by mutual consent the conflict was suspended, and the living combatants paused and separated, glancing at the intruders. One of them was Edward Lansdown, whose eyes were roving wildly around the room; the other was a tall, dark-complexioned person, dressed in man's clothes, but the long, floating hair, and form revealed by the disordered dress, proclaimed the wearer to be a woman.

Her eyes fell upon the form of one of the outlaws, who was now resting upon his elbow, with the blood ebbing in jets from his breast, glaring at her through the eyelet-holes of his mask. She sprang forward and knelt beside him, while a low, agonized cry broke from her lips, and tore from his head the black hood.

"Oh, mas'r Jerome—*dear* Jerome, I didn't think of this—I didn't know you'd be here!"

"Nettie! Oh, curse you—you've betrayed me! Take that, then!" snarled Jerome Malleville, as he thrust the muzzle of his revolver against the breast of Nettie, the quadroon, and fired.

She never uttered a cry, but slowly sunk forward, and with her last dying breath pressed a soft gentle kiss upon the livid lips of her murderer; and then they lay there, the dead and the dying.

Unnoting this, Edward's eyes rested upon the erect form of the Masked Outlaw, who stood as if petrified, and the young settler made one step forward with outstretched arms. With a low, agonizing cry, the sable figure raised its pistol and fired. But the muzzle was directed toward itself, not the other. Fired, and slowly sunk down, murmuring:

"Edward—my love—forgive me!"

He sprang forward and caught the dying one in his arms, and gently removed the mask. A murmur of horror ran through the room, as the pale, beautiful—still lovely, despite the death-agony—features were recognized by all—the features of *Isabella Sherwood*!

The mystery of the Masked Outlaw was a mystery no longer.

CHAPTER XII.

ALICE'S STORY.

THE figure we noticed on the evening of that fatal night was indeed none other than Alice Walker. And it was a hasty sketch of her adventures that had caused the quick gathering of the Vigilance Committee, ending so fatally to the outlaw band, as detailed. Her story was as follows:

On the evening of the day preceding that on which the thunderbolt fell, Alice had returned to the library after retiring, for some forgotten article. Being in her night-dress and hearing footsteps approaching, she hastily concealed herself behind the heavy window-curtains, hoping there to escape observation. The door opened and Isabella and Jerome entered, seating themselves side by side upon the sofa, and conversing in earnest tones.

To her horror Alice learned that Malleville was no brother—that, in fact, he was Isabella's husband, although they had been separated for several years. This was alluded to, as well as the cause of their parting. Reckless profligacy and sin upon both sides, united to wild, ungovernably fierce tempers, caused it; and then followed mutual recriminations, that, if true, evinced a terrible depth of crime and disregard of everything holy and just.

Then Isabella confessed her reasons for inducing Malleville to pass himself off as her brother. She had fallen fiercely, madly in love with the handsome, noble-hearted young settler, Edward Lansdown, and had resolved to win him. To this the man had consented, but upon one condition.

If she would not consent to that condition, and assist him in every way she could, why he would denounce her as a married woman to Lansdown, and as the Masked Outlaw, to the entire settlement. This he would do, unless she would do her best to further his suit with Alice Walker, for whom he had conceived a violent passion.

At this point of the dialogue, Alice felt her senses leave her, and with a low cry she sunk to the floor, fainting. When she recovered, she was confined in the second story, back room, the one window of which was closely fastened and thickly padded. And here she was visited by Isabella, who soon extracted the confession of her having heard all, and then was sternly told that she should never leave the room until she was the wife of Jerome Malleville, and Isabella had won Edward Lansdown.

Then Isabella came the next day and told her how adroitly she had tricked the settlers by the trumped-up story of her abduction, while it was all a farce. She dwelt with malicious emphasis on the grief of the family; and thus it went on, day by day. She told her, too, of her becoming the betrothed bride of Edward Lansdown, adding that when they were once married, then Alice must succumb, by fair means or by foul; until then she was safe.

But we can not dwell upon the picture.

It was at the time the settler was murdered, that Isabella had got shot, one of the buckshot striking her. To avoid having any witness who might tell unwelcome tales, Isabella had sent Nettie, the quadroon, to Leavenworth; but she had learned far more than her mistress imagined. As usual, the woman-friend told Alice that she was going to meet her band at mother Moss's house, and that same evening Alice managed to unfasten the window and descend to the garden, by means of a rope made from her bed-clothing. The rest they knew.

As the reader knows, "Alexander Dumas," was none other than Nettie, and when Edward had gained access to her he forced her to acknowledge the entire truth. That she had mailed the two letters, and that Alice was imprisoned at the Grable house, by Isabella Sherwood and Jerome Malleville. She, too, told a fearful tale regarding her mistress, and it more than confirmed the taunts that Alice had overheard.

Born an only child and losing her mother at an early age, Isabella had been allowed to have her own way in everything, and had grown up a fearfully spoiled and ruined child. Her father, wealthy, dissipated and an infidel, encouraged and nurtured the vicious passions that were inherent in her nature, derived from both parents. Very young, she married a young Southerner, already a gambler, *roue* and a drunkard, despite his not yet being of age. The result may be guessed. They parted, and each plunged still deeper into every vice and folly.

Isabella's father died, and left her penniless. From one step she went to another, and one fine season she appeared at the watering-places as Mrs. Sherwood, the wife of a merchant prince. Mr. Sherwood made his will, and—died. To avoid the very troublesome hints that gradually gained credence, Isabella came out West, made the acquaintance of a "Colonel Jamison," and was initiated by him into all the mysteries and fascinations of "horse-dealing" and "passing the queer."

One fine day he was *suspended* from his duties—at the end of a rope—and she then emigrated to Kansas, with the wealth of the worthy colonel. Her darling mind then conceived the plan that afterward made her so famous as the "Masked Outlaw"—the "Black Rider"—and a dozen other names that are still remembered and alluded to in the country of her principal exploits.

Edward had learned all this, and then forced Nettie to accompany him to the settlement under penalty of being handed over to the authorities at Leavenworth, and they arrived at the robbers' rendezvous, as detailed.

Isabella Sherwood's body was removed from the cabin, and decently interred in the shady woodland beside the sparkling, murmuring brook, that passed near her house, and a plain wooden cross marks the spot beneath which rests that once peerless form that concealed so dark and stained a spirit; a wrecked life.

Nettie, Malleville and the remainder of the outlaws for whom no claim was made—for the majority were settlers who had been looked upon as honest, exemplary citizens, whose families resided near by—were buried in the woods, in unmarked graves; but the old settlers can still point out the spot, covered with vines and brambles, tangled and vicious; a fitting monument for those whose dust rests beneath; and will narrate the events of that fearful night, in which perchance they had participated.

Time rolled on, and the deep wound made in the young settler's heart when he found out the fearful wickedness of his idol, when he learned how blackened and corrupt was the soul of her upon whom he had lavished his heart's love, gradually healed; and he began, day by day, to feel a deeper, more tender interest in the gentle, true-hearted Alice, until one day the truth came to him, and he knew that he loved her. Loved her with a deep, pure, holy love that would grow more strong and gather strength from itself; a love far different from the maddening, fiery passion he had felt for Isabella Sherwood.

And he bared his heart to Alice, told her all, and asked for her love, little dreaming that it had been his for so long a weary time. Alice gave one sob, and then, as she was closely folded to his breast, she felt at holy rest.

They were married, and two years afterward moved into the fine old "Grable House," that Edward had bought. This together with the furniture and farm had been sold—to indemnify, in part, the settlers who had lost so heavily by the Masked Outlaw and her band, and then, the owner becoming dissatisfied, Edward purchased it as stated.

At this place the young couple—middle-aged, now, with a half-dozen little lads and little lassies, who claim them as parents—still live. John Lansdown has a home with them, but good Mrs. Lansdown only lived long enough to kiss her first grandchild.

Their life was cloudy and bitter, once, but now it is bright and happy, making ample amends, and although they may sometimes think of the tragic events of the past, those gloomy reminiscences are quickly banished by one look around upon their happy home, and the gay, joyous faces enshrined therein.

And thus we leave them.

THE END.

BEADLE'S HALF-DIME LIBRARY.

1 **Deadwood Dick**, the Prince of the Road. By E. L. Wheeler.
2 **Yellowstone Jack**. By Joseph E. Badger, Jr.
3 **Kansas King**. By Buffalo Bill, (Hon. W. F. Cody.)
4 **The Wild-Horse Hunters**. By Captain Mayne Reid and Captain Frederick Whittaker.
5 **Vagabond Joe**, the Young Wandering Jew. By Oil Coomes.
6 **Bill Biddon, Trapper**. By Edward S. Ellis.
7 **The Flying Yankee**. By Colonel Prentiss Ingraham.
8 **Seth Jones**, or, The Captives of the Frontier. By E. S. Ellis.
9 **Adventures of Baron Munchausen**.
10 **Nat Todd**, or, The Fate of the Sioux Captives. By E. S. Ellis.
11 **The Two Detectives**. By Albert W. Aiken.
12 **Gulliver's Travels**. A Voyage to Lilliput, and a Voyage to Brobdingnag. By Dean Swift.
13 **The Dumb Spy**. By Oil Coomes.
14 **Aladdin**, or, The Wonderful Lamp.
15 **The Sea-Cat**. By Captain Frederick Whittaker.
16 **Robinson Crusoe**. (27 Illustrations.) By Defoe.
17 **Ralph Roy**, the Boy Buccaneer. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
18 **Sindbad the Sailor**. From the Arabian Nights.
19 **The Phantom Spy**. By Buffalo Bill.
20 **The Double Diggers**. By Edward L. Wheeler.
21 **The Frontier Angel**. By Edward S. Ellis.
22 **The Sea Serpent**, or, The Boy Robinson Crusoe. By J. Lewis.
23 **Nick o' the Night**, or, The Boy Spy of '76. By T. C. Harbaugh.
24 **Diamond Dick**. By Colonel Prentiss Ingraham.
25 **The Boy Captain**. By Roger Starbuck.
26 **Cloven Hoof**, the Buffalo Demon. By Edward L. Wheeler.
27 **Antelope Abe**, the Boy Guide. By Oil Coomes.
28 **Buffalo Ben**, the Prince of the Pistol. By E. L. Wheeler.
29 **The Dumb Page**. By Captain Frederick Whittaker.
30 **Roaring Ralph Rockwood**. By Harry St. George.
31 **Keen-Knife**, Prince of the Prairies. By Oil Coomes.
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